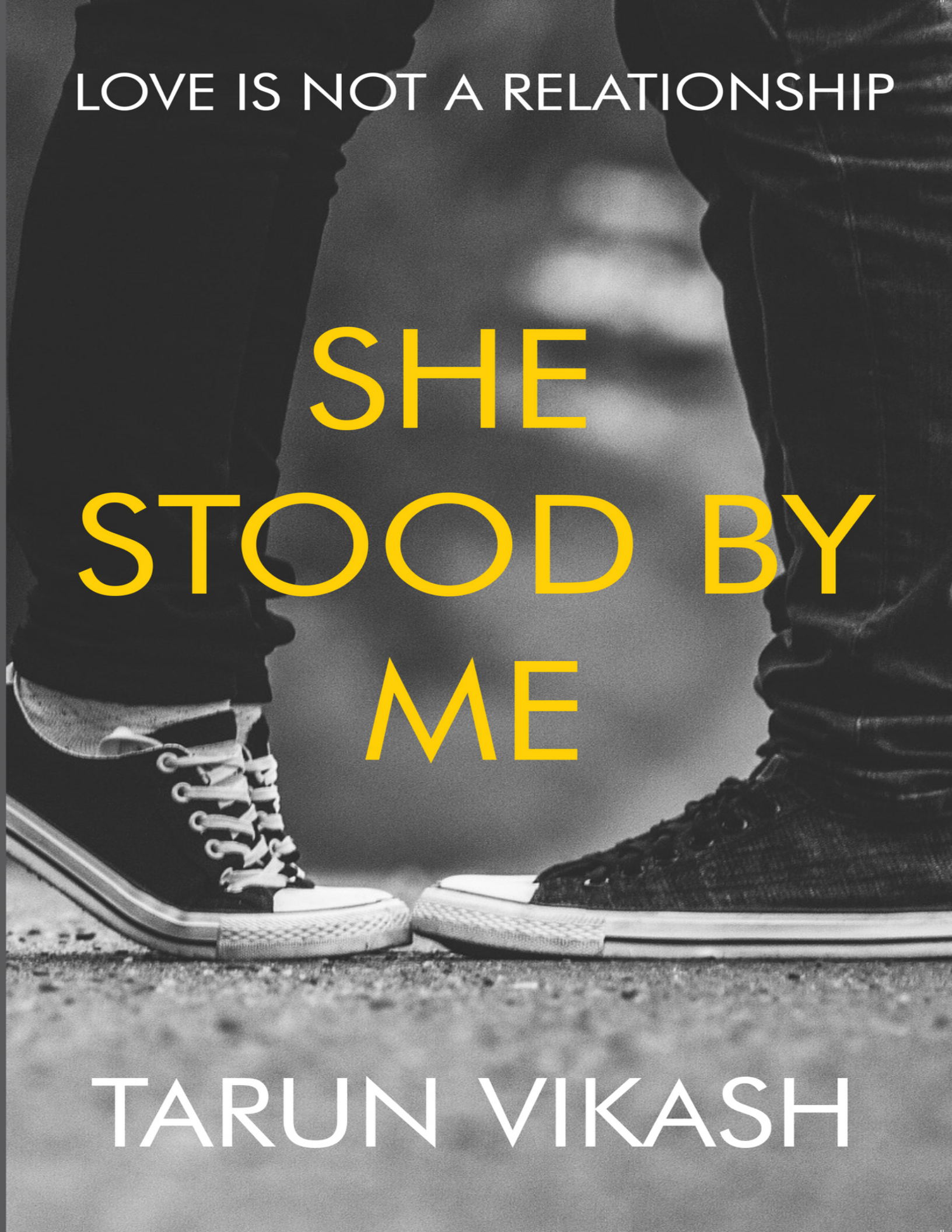
LOVE IS NOT A RELATIONSHIP

SHE STOOD BY ME



TARUN VIKASH

VISIT…

SHE STOOD BY ME

TARUN VIKASH

GOYA PUBLISHING

Delhi | Kolkata | Hyderabad

Delhi | Kolkata | Hyderabad

Copyright © 2019 TARUN VIKASH 2019

All Rights Reserved.

ISBN: 978-93-88951-86-9

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, or otherwise circulated without the copyright owner’s prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser and without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any other means without the permission of the copyright owner.

PROLOGUE

I wake up suddenly. I immediately look for my watch but can't find it. I haven't slept properly for the whole night. My eyes are burning. I check my phone to see if she has messaged me. She hasn't. I have this habit of checking her message every day I get up. But for the last few days, I haven't received any. She waits for me in the morning, the only time when we see each other, meet each other when I hold her and tell her that I am there for her. But I guess, I go there to tell myself, that if she is there, my life is fine. I check the time on my phone. It's 8 a.m. I am late. I immediately leave my bed when my eyes fall on the mirror. It looks as if I have not slept for years. I get ready in some time. I wear the same yellow shirt she likes the most and check the watch again. I have to reach there before 9. I check for a cab immediately and I find one.

'Take me to Manipal Hospital,' I said, as I sat inside the cab.

'How are you sir?' the driver asked.

I looked at him in the mirror. He was a young guy, probably twenty-five years of age. I looked at him again. His face seemed familiar but I am not able to recall. I have stopped remembering faces. I have stopped talking to people. I just want to talk to her, be with her. That's it. Those few minutes with her, I feel like I am alive. Seeing her in that bed hurts me. It tears my heart out but seeing her close to my eyes makes me feel I am not alone.

'Oh yes, Ganesh our cab driver. But,' I said.

'I left the company, sir,' he said interrupting.

'You look in a hurry?' he asked.

'Yes, Can you please be fast? I am getting late,'

We leave our apartment and reach the lane to the highway. There is huge traffic ahead of us. The driver keeps looking at the traffic without moving.

'Listen, can you please take another route? Someone is waiting for me,'

'Madam sir?' he asked.

'He remembers her. I have told him once about her,'

'Yes,' I said.

He looked at his watch and then looked at the traffic. He made a phone call to someone and spoke something. I could make out bits and pieces of what he was speaking.

'Illa Illa.' he said and disconnected the call.

'Sir, there is jam everywhere. There is no chance we can make it through

any other route,’
‘Are you kidding me? Even on a weekend?’ I asked.
‘Bangalore is like this for years,’ he said.
‘Then you might know some other route. You have been staying here for years right?’ I asked.
‘Sir, I just checked with a few people. All routes are blocked.’
‘Damn it.’
In a few seconds, I see there is a huge queue of vehicles around us. To my left, a couple was sitting in another auto. The girl was sitting at a distance from the boy just like Aparna used to.
‘Sir, I have seen Madam once,’ the driver said.
‘Sir, you listening,’ he said again.
‘Oh yes, I heard. But where did you see her?’ I asked, taking my eyes off the couple.
‘She came once to meet you in the office and you told me that you don’t need the cab,’ he said.
‘Oh yes, I remember.’ I said.
‘Do you see that couple?’ I asked the driver.
‘They look happy together,’ he said looking at them.
‘That’s what love is all about. Just the presence of that person means everything to you and their absence can break you.’ I said looking at the couple again.
‘Sir, I have seen many girls and boys sitting like couples in my cab,’ he said.
‘It’s nice right?’ I said.
‘But I have seen the same girls and boys sitting with someone else a few days later. I hardly see people falling in love these days,’ he said.
‘People don’t know the meaning of love Ganesh. All they know is to use each other until they find someone else. Except for love, they look for everything else *money, status, personality,*’ I said.
‘Sir, if you don’t mind, can I ask you something?’ he said.
‘Yes tell me,’ I said.
‘Sir, there is huge traffic and we are stuck here. Probably it will take time. Why don’t you tell me your story? Tell me about madam. How things started and all?’

I didn’t say a word and looked at the couple again. The girl nudged the boy probably asking him to sit at a distance just like Aparna used to. The boy

moved away from the girl, exactly how I used to do. I checked my watch. It was already too late for me to reach on time but I had no idea why the driver wanted to know about us. He remembered everything I had told him.
‘You won’t leave me until I tell you our story right?’ I asked.
He smiled, without saying a word. I looked at the traffic and then I looked at him. His keen eyes met mine.
‘What?’ I asked looking at him.
‘Sir, I am waiting,’ he said.
‘Abhi, there is no escape. You have to tell him.’ the inner me said.

Chapter 1

‘Get up you fool, we are getting late.’ I said, but Manish, he was still sleeping. And why wouldn’t he? I have no doubt, for the whole night, he must be talking on his phone to his ex-girlfriend convincing her to accept him again. There is nothing like self-respect in his life. He loves being around girls. Girls flatter him, he flatters girls and this cycle goes on. I hate it. Why? Because I have no option. I am scared to talk to girls actually, but I don’t think there is anything wrong with that. Not all guys are extrovert. I had issues talking to them in the past and I have it even today. I hate myself for being like this but I hate Manish too. Last night, he spoke to the only girl I ever liked as if he had known her forever.
‘Manish, get up for god’s sake? Look at your watch damn it.’ I shouted and kicked him hard so that he gets up.
‘Early morning gone mad or what Abhi?’ he said scrubbing his bum.
‘Look at your watch you fool. We need to leave on time,’
‘Oh please. I know why you are in so much hurry. You have to meet her. Isn’t it?’
‘Shut up and get ready,’
‘And don’t you dare look at her the way you were looking last night.’ I added. *If I warn him he might not do it but if I don’t he will definitely do it.*
‘Now don’t start again. I was just admiring her,’
‘Excuse me! Did you say admiring? Bloody you stare at every girl like a jerk.’
‘Abhi, is that how you talk to your best friend?’
‘And is that how you look at the girl I like?’
‘Come on Abhi. She is beautiful. Do you expect me to keep my eyes closed and sit like a monk?’
‘Not monk, monkey you must say. You barely behave like humans when you see girls around you.’
‘What would I do if Aparna is beautiful? I just can’t control,’
I felt like slapping him.
‘Whatever, but don’t talk shit when she comes today,’ I said.
‘It’s called being funny damn it. You won’t understand,’
‘She is not like that and I have no idea, why she was even talking to you last night,’
‘Girls just feel comfortable around me and you are jealous. Accept it,’
‘Oh please. You and your dumb thesis on girls, I don’t want. I beg of you.

And don’t create a mess this time.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘While returning from the IIT centre, you are going to the station to check for the returning tickets,’
‘Why can’t you go?’
‘Because I have to drop her back home. I can’t leave her alone with a jerk like you.’
‘Abhi,’ he grunted.
‘Shut up,’
‘My dad is her dad’s best friend. You choose Dhanbad as our IIT centre because I told you. You should thank me for that at least,’
‘In your dreams,’ I said.
‘Don’t you dare ask me any help now.’
‘Ok fine, thanks for everything and thanks again for making me chose Dhanbad as my IIT center. But we are going back tonight and I only had last night to talk to her. And you didn’t even allow me to do that,’
‘You guys did speak. Don’t forget,’
‘Yes, if saying *‘Hi’*, means speaking to a girl then I did speak,’
‘Stop over-reacting. You both are having the same IIT centre now. You can speak to her over there,’
‘You know, I can’t speak to her when I am alone,’
‘Be like a man. Talk to her. Look at me.’ he said. I looked at him. I felt disgusting.
‘It’s ok. I will see what to do.’ I said.
‘I can help you if you want.’
‘You have already helped me a lot Manish. So, please stay away from her,’
‘Ok fine. I will try.’
‘What the hell do you mean *you will try*?’
‘What do you want me to do Abhi? You know me. Beautiful girls are my weakness.’
‘Manish I am begging you,’
‘Ok fine. I will not speak to her.’
‘She is coming in some time. You know what you have to do,’
‘Yes, I have to sit in the front seat and you both will sit in the back seat.’ he said and pulled his blanket over to sleep.
We were already too late.
I kicked him, this time a little harder than before when he screamed and

looked at me with his puppy face.
‘Will you stop hitting me for god’s sake?’ he said angrily soothing his bum.
‘I am sorry.’
‘What sorry? You should be sorry for fighting with me when you know that I am the one who got you so close to her.’
‘Sorry for that too.’ I said and kissed him on his left cheek. He looked at me with disgust wiping his face. I felt disgusted too.
‘Have you gone mad or what you idiot? If anyone sees you doing this they will think we are gay.’ he said, widening his eyes. With his reaction, I wanted to kiss him one more time. After all, I met her only because of him but I knew he would have slapped me.
‘Get up now.’ I said when my phone rang. It was Aparna.
‘You there?’ she asked as I forgot to say hello after picking up the phone. My mind stops working when I hear her voice.
‘Yes tell me.’ I said.
‘What time you guys are leaving?’
‘How much time it will take for you to come?’ I asked.
‘I will be there in the next thirty minutes.’
I looked at my watch.
‘Manish said when girls say thirty, it means an hour.’
‘Stop listening to that idiot and stay away from him as much as possible.’ the inner me said.
‘Abhishek, you there?’ she asked.
‘Oh yes, thanks.’
‘What?’
‘Oh no, I am sorry.’ I said.
‘What are you saying?’
‘I mean, we will be leaving in thirty minutes.’ I said.
‘See you.’ she said and disconnected the call.
Manish kicked me really hard this time.
‘Why did you hit me you idiot?’
‘Is this how you talk to a girl?’
‘Look, you don’t tell me how to talk? I know it ok?’
‘I saw, how much you know. You were stammering all the time talking to her,’
‘Really?’
‘Yes. You look nervous goddamn it,’

‘Do I?’ I asked and checked my face into the mirror. It had turned pink.
‘Idiot, why haven’t the cab driver called yet? He was supposed to be here by 7:30 right?’ I asked.
‘Oh shit,’ he said giving me a heart stroke already.
‘Manish, did you even book the cab?’ I asked. He looked at me and then he looked at the ceiling. He ran in his shorts which were looking really short but I don’t know-how.
‘Manish, don’t you dare tell me you haven’t booked it. What would she think of us?’ I screamed.
‘That she met two biggest idiots last night.’ the inner me said.
‘Shut up you fool. I am searching for the driver’s number.’ Manish replied from the other room.
‘Manish.’ someone screamed from outside. I ran to the balcony.
‘Sir, the gatekeeper has asked me to wait over here. You are Manish right?’ a man asked. He was the driver probably. He wore a white dress which was too dirty to avoid noticing.
‘No, I am not Manish,’
‘Who are you then?’
‘I am Abhishek,’ I said when he interrupted.
‘But the cab is booked for Manish,’ he said and went inside the cab.
‘Excuse me. Look at me. Manish is inside and I am his friend Abhishek,’
‘Where is Manish but?’ he said peeping from the window now.
‘Don’t you get it, I am his friend,’ I shouted.
‘But where is he?’ he shouted too.
I didn’t reply to him this time.
‘Manish.’ I shouted, wondering where the hell is he. He came running from the bathroom. Probably, he would have gone to pee and not sure if he even finished. Yuck. Anyways he can always go back and pee more if he wasn’t done. I saw a few ladies coming to their balcony in their nightdress.
‘What happened and why are you shouting like this?’ Manish asked looking at the ladies. I knew he was not going to miss the view.
‘She is pretty bro,’ he said looking at the woman who had her hairs opened. She was beautiful and her untied hair made her look even more beautiful. I ignored her again.
‘Shut up. Someone else wants to see your ugly face too.’ I said.
‘So you booked the cab. Is it?’ the driver screamed.
He was still not satisfied with my morning roar. He wanted more.

‘Yes. I booked the cab,’ Manish screamed too.
‘Ok. Take your time. I am waiting.’ the driver said, rolling his eyeballs at the ladies. Most men are like Manish, I realized. We barely had any time to get ready.
I was really nervous. Just a few more minutes before I see her again.
‘What would I say to her? Hi or Hello? Or Shall I keep quiet? Will it be fine if I just smile? Will it not look rude?’
‘Just throw a smile. You can’t do anything. You just can’t,’ the inner me said.
‘Will that be ok?’
‘Are you dumb?’ the inner me replied.
I felt lost and confused. It’s difficult to control your brain when you like a girl. I don’t know, if there is some issue in men’s hormones or if it’s a genetic disease when it comes to talking to a girl. And I have no clue how Manish talks to every girl casually. There must be some problem with me. If I was like Manish, I might have had ex-girlfriends, if not girlfriends. It might have made me feel good too, just like it does to him.
‘Having an ex means you have been successful in your life. Girls want you.’ he once told me.
Damn it. I looked at my watch. Twenty more minutes and she will be here. I checked the room looking for Manish. He was gone and locked in the bathroom. Thank God, there was a spare one. I got ready in a few minutes. I had stood in front of the mirror a hundred times. I had never behaved this weird. I made sure I looked good. I was checking every possible expression on my face and how I look saying those words. *Who does that?* I even sprayed perfume on my shirt. I am not a perfume person and I knew, it was choking me to death. I just wanted her to feel nice as she sits inside the cab beside me. I don’t know what I was doing but I was behaving really weird.
‘She might be coming any second,’ I thought tucking my long shirt. I hurried to the cab immediately. Ok, I wasn’t in a hurry to get inside the cab. I wanted to see her before Manish did. I still didn’t trust him, if he would do what I had asked him to. I reached close to the cab when I saw her coming out of her house. Our flat was just two blocks away from her flat. I heard someone coming down the stairs. It was probably Manish. Aparna had books in her hands. She wore specs too. I hadn’t seen her in specs before. She looked cute in those. She came a little closer, still escaping eye contact with me.

‘How will I ever stop falling for you?’ I wanted to say but I didn’t. She smiled looking at me. We three sat in the cab. Manish sat in the front seat and I sat in the back seat with Aparna sitting right beside me, I mean to my left. Manish looked at me and then he smelled the air in the cab. I faked a smile at him trying to justify my side with a silence. He knew how much I had hated perfumes all my life.
‘Hey have you put perfume?’ he asked.
‘You idiot.’ I cursed him within.
‘Who me? I haven’t put any perfume.’ I said, glaring at him.
‘Who talks like that in front of girls?’ I told to myself.
He turned around and giggled. It was funny to him. Aparna smiled too. I sat on my seat but I wanted to see her. I rolled my eyeballs and fixed them on the front mirror. I was able to look at her without turning my head. She was busy in her books as if she didn’t know who was sitting right beside her. Had she sat on the front seat and me diagonal to her, I wouldn’t have struggled this much to see her. And suddenly, my eyes met her eyes in the front mirror. She was using the same mirror to look at me. A dead silence grabbed both of us. Damn it.

We immediately looked away from the mirror as if we didn’t know what just happened but it felt nice after a few seconds. I liked it but every single second after that, we spent like we didn’t know each other. I didn’t even try to look at the mirror again. A few hours later, we were done with our papers. While returning she sat in the front seat and Manish sat beside me. I don’t know why she was behaving so weird. I had told her that I was leaving tonight. We were in Dhanbad for just two days. A little later, Manish got down near the station. He had to check if our tickets were confirmed or not. We were on the waiting list. Aparna came and sat beside me.

One can never understand girls. Just can’t even if we try to. Why don’t they just speak up what they want to? Damn it. It confuses us so much that we end up not speaking what we want. She looked at me and then she looked outside the window. I looked at her in the mirror but she was still looking outside as if she was angry with me. I wanted to talk to her, listen to her voice, see her smiling but my heart was beating fast as if, I am going to lose her. I looked at her but she was still busy thinking something.
‘How much more time will it take to reach?’ I asked the driver.
‘Five minutes.’ he replied when suddenly she looked at me.

The cab stopped. She got out of the cab without saying a word. The driver started the cab when I turned towards her thinking she would look at me at least. She didn't.
'Abhishek.' she called out my name as I left. I asked the driver to stop. I got down from the cab and came closer to her.
'I will call you.' she said smiling.
'See you.' I said in a hurry and rushed towards the cab. Our tickets got confirmed and we boarded the train to Patna. My phone buzzed. I thought it was her but it was Shruti didi, my elder sister. I received the call immediately.
'Abhi, why haven't you called me since you reached haan?' she asked. Maybe she was angry.
'I was trying to call you but your phone was not reachable,' I lied to her.
'Anything that I should know about?' she asked.
'I met her,' I said, forgetting she had no idea what I was talking about. There is a thing about Shruti didi. You can't tell her everything.
'You met whom idiot?' she asked when I further realized I shouldn't have told her. I had a reason, a big one.
'Ok leave all this. How is Mom?'
'Excuse me. Don't change the topic now. I know you.'
'Ok go sleep. I am tired.' I said.
'Tell me or else I will ask Manish.' she said.
I looked at Manish and imagined everything that he would tell her. If she asks him, that idiot would exaggerate everything and then she would ask me so many questions which I would die clarifying.
'Remember, I told you about a girl from A.N.Institute,' I said.
'But she was here right?'
'Yes, she moved with her family to Dhanbad a few days back,'
'What?' she screamed.
'Yes and please don't shout,' I said.
'But how come?'
'Her dad got posted here.'
'But how did you meet her? Manish's dad, Vinod uncle was also there with you guys. You were staying with him. Isn't it?'
'Vinod uncle is her dad's friend.'
'Don't tell me. Did Manish plan all this?'
'Oh no. We didn't even know all this until we reached here,'

‘Then how did you guys meet?’
‘Aparna’s dad invited Vinod uncle along with us for the dinner when he got to know Manish was here.’
‘So you guys met her at her home?’ she asked.
‘Yes.’
‘So you spoke to her?’
‘Oh no. You know how Manish is and even Vinod uncle was not there. He had to leave for Delhi.’
‘Don’t tell me. Was Manish behaving the same way?’
‘Oh yes. You know girls are his weakness but I told him to behave properly in front of her.’
‘When did you speak to her then?’
‘Today, while I was returning with her in the cab,’
‘What? What was she doing with you in the cab?’
‘Will you stop screaming?’
‘Ok, continue.’
I told her the whole story when mom called her and she had to disconnect the phone. I reached Patna the next morning.

Chapter 2

I had started hating my Mom. She was using my phone to talk to dad. I asked her to use the landline but she refused, saying the connection was not good there. I was wondering if Shruti didi told her everything about Aparna. You cannot trust your sister when it comes to keeping things to themselves. Aparna had both my numbers. So, I had no idea where she would call, landline or mobile. If my Mom picks up the phone, I knew I was dead and if Shruti didi picks up the phone, I knew I was dead for sure. So every time the phone rang, I would get a mini heart attack and I would run to receive the phone. I was getting lunatic. Mom would often ask me if I don’t have any other work every time she saw me sitting close to her without moving. She had no idea that if I move to another room, I had more chances of getting a heart attack. But she would insist and I would be

compelled to leave. The height of my craziness was that I had even started snatching phones from my family members.

Two months later, we met again. I mean Manish and I. I was busy with Mili didi's engagement that happened earlier this month. Manish was busy with his new girlfriend and the fun part is that he was serious this time. He had been serious before too but he dumped all of them. He said they were not his type. IIT results were out. None of us could clear it. And, we all had gathered to celebrate it.

Maurya complex, the venue.

Manish and I arrived around 6:30 p.m, a little late than we had planned. Rohit and Ritesh reached on time. The first two floors were stuffed with people. There was barely a seat available.

'Sir this way.' the manager said. We went to the third floor.

'Eight Tandoori Roti, One Chicken Chilli, One Kadhai Paneer, One Dal Fry, and Four Coca Cola,' Manish said as I kept looking at the menu not knowing what I was searching for.

'And four rosogullas too.' Rohit added further.

I remembered something. The last time I had a rosogulla was at Aparna's home. I was missing her. Ritesh was busy citing his latest love interest. I hate neighbourhood love stories. They are so boring. The phone buzzed. Manish picked it up.

'Who is this?' he asked and looked at me as he got a reply from the other side. His eyes widened.

'Yes tell me.' he said, a little louder this time. Maybe it was his girlfriend on the other side whom he had escaped somehow to find time for this meeting. He wasn't responding anything except those two letters *'OK'* on that call. I wanted to know what he was talking about and who he was talking to. He came back to the table with a smile. He held my hand firmly but didn't say a word.

'What happened?' I asked.

'Nothing bro. Just a phone call.' he said.

'I saw that but what's it that you are hiding?'

'Nothing, it doesn't concern you,' he said and held my hand one more time.

'Finish the food fast. We are late already.' he added as I picked that last Tandoori roti from the plate. I ate my share of rosogulla which was the best thing on the table for obvious reasons. I was missing her even more now.

We left in another half an hour. Manish had to drop me on his bike. Ritesh

and Rohit left on their respective bikes. I didn't want to meet them any sooner. They kept boring me with their love stories.
'Abhi, would you like to ride?' Manish asked as we came out of the parking lot. He never did that before. He was behaving weird since he got that call.
'Yes, if you want me to.' I said. I loved riding his bike. I never had one, except that decade-old scooter that dies after every kilometre. Dad would use it to buy vegetables but he never risked taking it to the office. I rode the bike on those empty lanes after a long time. Before reaching home, we stopped near the shores of Ganga. It was really long since we had spent time together like this. Last time when we came here, we saw a few couples sitting here in groups but we made sure that we don't disturb them. It was no different this time either. In the background on my phone, Radio Mirchi was busy playing our favourite songs. Manish told that he wanted to start a business of his own but his dad was not allowing him to do so. Manish wanted to move to Delhi as he had more options there but he needed money for that. I told him to give me some time so that I could help him . He was in no hurry either. He told about Nidhi, his girlfriend that she was the best thing that ever happened to him.
'I have something to tell you,' he said.
'I am listening. Go ahead,' I said.
'Aparna's dad was here last week. He stayed at my home,'
'Are you serious?'
'Yes and guess what?'
'Tell me.'
'Aparna is here too and you are meeting her tomorrow,'
'Don't tell me,'
'She convinced her dad somehow to come over here.'
Everything around me looked beautiful. The moon, the winds, the sound of those waves and of course the music which was playing in the background. I looked at my phone. The famous titanic song, '*I see you, I feel you'* was playing. I stood up and looked at Manish.
'What happened?' he asked. I held his hands and pulled him up without saying a word to dance. And then, I held him by his waist and pulled him even closer. I saw fear in his eyes. Of course, I was not going to kiss him but he behaved as I if would do so. And then, he held me by my shoulders and came even closer. I was taller so I had the benefit of playing the male lead and he became Aparna for the moment. And then, I stirred my feet

towards the shore holding him by the waist but he dragged me back from the shore to where we were sitting holding my shoulders tighter. I gave him a tough look as he pulled me back.
‘Bro control yourself. There are people near the shore. They will laugh at us.’ he said.
I hardly cared what he said. We kept moving our feet on every beat of the song holding each other like a couple. And then, the lyrics came, ‘*You are safe in my heart’*. I lifted Manish in my arms and swung him in the air. Manish felt like a gay at that moment. I too felt the same but not as much as he was. We danced like crazy on the sand for another few minutes and then I put him down as the song stopped.

And then, Manish shouted, *‘Yooooooohooooooooooooouu’* throwing his hands in the air. I followed him too. We hardly cared if anyone saw us doing that. We repeated the entire incident one more time from the beginning and I was jumping every time Aparna’s name was coming amidst our conversation. We kept talking for some more time when we realized we had to return to our home.

I wasn’t riding this time. I just sat behind him and enjoyed the breeze which had turned chill by now. After dropping me, Manish left for his home. I danced my way to the door like an idiot and entered my room with a smile. When Mom asked *why I was late*, I held her hands and danced with her without saying a word. A little twist here and a little twist there. My mom held my cheeks and told me to always keep smiling. Well, she had no idea why her son was so happy. I went to sleep but it was not happening. I couldn’t do anything more than just looking at the ceiling and then looking at the watch. I slept thinking about her.
‘Get up Abhi.’ Mom said when I woke up.
‘What’s the time?’ I asked.
‘It’s going to be 8 a.m’
‘She would be in Mukherjee’s class by 8.’ Manish had told before dropping me last night. I was already late. I opened my wardrobe. My shirts were missing.
‘Mom where are my clothes? Don’t tell me you have kept it for washing,’
‘I was cleaning the wardrobe. Your clothes are on the bed,’
‘Thanks.’ I said and checked quickly what to wear.
My eyes fell on a red shirt. It was bright and colourful. I wore it and looked at myself in the mirror. I knew what Manish would say if he saw me

wearing red. I kept it back in the wardrobe. With a lot of running thoughts, my eyes fell on a yellow striped shirt. With that, I picked blue denim jeans. It took around fifteen minutes for me to get ready. I took an auto as I bolted out of the house skipping Mom and breakfast.
A message flashed on my phone after a few minutes.
'Where are you, idiot?' It was from Manish. There was no point in replying. My phone buzzed the next second.
'Hi, I am,' I said when Manish interrupted.
'Why are you, late idiot? Didn't I tell you?'
'You stop talking like my Mom,'
'Whatever but why are you late?'
'I was dreaming about Nidhi. Happy?'
'Abhi, be in your limits,'
'Then keep the phone,' I said.
'Someone is waiting for you,'
'I know. Can you tell me, which colour dress has she worn?'
'I am not telling you anything. Just come and see for yourself,'
'Please.' I said in a gloomy tone thinking he will tell me.
He disconnected the call.
'How much time it will take?' I asked the auto driver.
'Ten more minutes.' he said. I got a message from Nidhi.
'Are you really dumb?' it read.
'Aparna is waiting for you idiot.' it read further. My eyes got stuck on the last word '*idiot*'. I cursed her and then I looked at the first word. A smile came on my face as I read that name.
'How is she looking?' I typed and deleted it. I knew Nidhi will react just like her boyfriend.
'I am wearing a yellow shirt,' I typed and sent it.
'Me too.' she replied. I cursed her instantly.
'Tell her that I missed her.' I typed and deleted it again. I checked my face in the rear-view mirror. I looked fine. I reached.
'What would I say to her when I see her now? Will a casual '*Hi*' be fine or a smile would be better?' I thought. I reached close to the door. I saw a guy from our batch coming with a panic look on his face.
'Hi Abhishek,' he said. He knew my name. The only thing I could remember was that he was our batch's dumbest guy.
'Manoj right?' I said as I recalled his name from one of the sessions.

‘Mukherjee came?’ he asked.
‘Yes, he is inside,’ I said.
‘Let’s go then,’ he added.
‘You go. I will come in some time.’ I said.
He left. I stood close to the front door and looked at Manish. I checked if Aparna was there but I couldn’t see her. Manoj entered without saying a word. He had the balls to do it. I didn’t. I tried looking for Manish but I couldn’t see him. I looked at the rest of the class. The girls were looking in the front but the boys weren’t. They were looking in another direction. I don’t know why when I came forward and saw Aparna sitting there. I cursed all of them. I came right in front of the entrance. Aparna sat in the front seat along with Nidhi. I looked for Manish. He was sitting behind them. Nidhi took her eyes off Mukherjee and looked at me. She nudged at Aparna probably telling her to stay away from me, just like she tells Manish. She hates me but it doesn’t matter because I hate her too. Aparna looked at me. She smiled. I saw those dimples on her left cheek. I missed them. She wore a white salwar kameez with hand embroidery done at the corners. Mukherjee was busy scrubbing a formula on the board. Two atoms of oxygen were trying to form an oxygen molecule. I looked at Manish and gestured at him to call Nidhi to sit with him. He did so.
‘Look, class, who is here?’ Mukherjee said as he turned around. My legs froze as my eyes met his.
‘Come inside.’ he said with a weird smile and turned towards the board silently. I entered making sure I don’t disturb anyone but no one looked interested in what Mukherjee was writing. They looked more interested in the new girl of our batch. In those few seconds, I admired her as much as I could until I sat down right beside her. I looked at the rest of the class. They were looking at me. There was utter silence as if someone had died.
‘Hi,’ I said as I sat down.
‘Hi,’ she said, managing her long hairs behind her ears. Mukherjee turned around. I looked at him.
‘Can we proceed Abhishek, if you don’t mind?’ he asked.
‘Yes sir, please.’ I said biting my teeth. The entire class laughed. This continued for the next few minutes where I was sliding my eyeballs to look at her. It was already four hours and the class was over. Manish had left with Nidhi. I had to drop Aparna but before that, I had to ask her that one thing which was going on in my head. I finally ended up asking her. ‘Are

you hungry?'
She looked at me. She was thinking something, maybe judging me but I didn't care. I just wanted to spend some time with her.
'We can leave if you are getting late.' I said. The idiot within me said that, I didn't. She smiled.
'You eat veg or non-veg?' she asked.
'Both,' I said.
'I am veg today,' she said.
'Is there a Canteen close by?' she asked.
'It's there,' I said pointing to the South Indian hotel.
'I like south Indian food.' she said with childlike glee. The hotel was at a distance. We took an auto and reached the place when I finally realized that my wallet was empty. I had no cash to pay to the driver. Without delaying a second she paid the fare. 'Thanks,' I said with guilt on my face.
'No Need,' she said
'But still,' I said and cursed myself again. *Who does that?*
'I still have to pay for the food.' she said smiling. I never thought I will mess up this way on my very first date. Yes, it was a date. Manish had told me when a girl comes out with you, it's a date.
I ordered a North Indian meal. She ordered the same, changing her mind at the last moment. I don't know why.
'That way,' I said as we received our order.
'Are you getting late?' I asked as we sat down.
'Nothing as such.' she said.
'Sorry I was really hungry,'
'I can see that on your face.'
' How is your Mom?' I asked.
'She is fine. She talks about you.'
'Is it?' I asked.
'I met her only once but,' I said.
'I don't know.' she said. Now, what does that mean when a girl says '*I don't know*'. Does that mean she doesn't want to tell further or does that mean she wants me to ask in detail? Anyways, I shooed away that thought and came back asking that only question which was killing me.
'You never called me?' I asked.
'I was waiting,' I added almost getting a lump in my throat.
'I called you twice,' she said instantly as if she too was waiting for me to

ask that.
‘How come we didn’t speak then?’
‘Every time some elderly lady will receive the phone and I had to disconnect the call,’
My heart skipped a beat thinking if Mom spoke to her.
‘Did you guys talk?’ I asked.
‘I told you, I was disconnecting the call immediately.’
‘But you never called me,’ she added.
‘I called you,’ I lied blatantly.
‘Oh is it?’ she asked making her eyes bigger.
‘My mom picked up?’ she asked further. I had to be smart.
‘No, maybe your brother picked up the call every time,’
‘Maybe Tarun,’ I added. I had to sound real, so I took a name.
‘It must be Praveen. He is having a crush on a girl and he speaks to her every day on the phone,’ she said.
‘Hahahahahaha.’ I laughed.
‘Funny right?’
‘Yes but girls fall for cute guys. He can’t help it.’ I said.
She smiled. A couple entered the restaurant. The lady had Mehendi on her hands. Maybe she was newly married.
‘My best friend is getting married. Isn’t it weird?’ she asked.
‘But why would it be weird?’ I asked.
‘She is my age,’ she said.
‘Is she as beautiful as you?’ I wanted to ask but I didn’t.
‘Point.’ I said.
‘And they don’t even love each other,’
‘But we barely see people falling in love these days,’ I added.
‘True but you never know,’ she said.
‘So are you going to attend your friend’s marriage?’ I asked.
‘I don’t know anyone over there except her,’
‘But you should go,’ I said. I really wanted her to ask me to come with her.
‘I don’t have a nice dress,’ she said, her face looking dull. ‘Anyways marriages are boring. It’s better not to go,’ I said.
‘But love marriages are the best.’ I added almost choking myself to death.
She looked at me making her big eyes bigger. I skipped a heartbeat, actually two. Guys should not talk about love with girls. Only girls should talk about love and love marriages.

‘But, you have to do a lot of drama to get there. No matter, how much the boy and the girl love each other, parents don’t agree,’
‘They need to convince their parents,’ I said.
‘Who will do that? More than parents, relatives have an issue.’
‘My sister had to do the same,’ I said.
‘Oh, you have a sister too?’
‘Not two but three,’ I said. She smiled.
‘Very funny.’
‘Is it a love marriage?’
‘Yes.’
‘How amazing? She managed everything herself?’
‘I helped her,’ I said.
‘Seriously, you?’ she said.
‘Excuse me?’ I said with an expression this time.
‘No, I mean you look innocent.’ she said.
‘I will tell you their story someday,’
‘I would love to know.’ she said.
‘Shall I tell you something?’ I said.
‘Yes tell me,’
‘Shall I tell her she is looking beautiful?’
‘Just make sure she doesn’t slap you. You already don’t know how to talk.’ the inner me said.
‘You are looking pretty.’ I said changing my mind at the last moment. Maybe the word ‘*pretty*’ made me feel I am in the safe zone. I don’t know why. She smiled.
‘Shall I tell you something too?’ she asked.
‘Yes tell me,’ I said my heart already beating fast.
‘Yellow looks good on you,’
‘Thanks.’ I said. I could have managed to throw just a smile. She told me about her hobbies which included reading novels, which I hated the most. She had read that book *five-point someone* by Chetan Bhagat which was her favourite. She liked his way of leaving his well-paying job and following his passion. When she asked me about my hobby, I looked to my left and then to my right and the only thing that was coming to my mind was *‘to look at you all the time’*. Of course, I didn’t say that.
‘I like reading newspaper,’ I said.
Yes, like a fool I ended up saying exactly those words. She kept looking at

me without saying a word. I almost had my heart in my mouth thinking if I had said something wrong. But then after a few seconds, she ended up laughing loudly. I could see all her thirty-two teeth and I couldn't understand for a moment *'Was it really that funny?'*.
'You are really funny,' she said.
'Thanks.' I said, like an idiot. Who talks like that. We left in some time. I dropped her to the PG. She paid for both of us. I told her that I will pay her back. She smilingly said, 'No need'.

I spent the entire night recalling our conversation and all that fuss I created the whole day. No wonder why Manish always calls me dumb whenever it comes to talking to girls. I felt nice about the fact that she looked happy in that little time we spent together, maybe for all the wrong reasons but it was her smile that I wanted to see.

Chapter 3

It was exactly two weeks. There was a function at my home. I wanted Aparna to meet my family.

I got down from the auto, waiting for her outside the institute. Officially, I was still not supposed to wait for her. If anyone asked which everyone did, I just quoted, '*Waiting for Manish*' faking a smile at them. They would look at me with a weird expression and leave. They all knew, whom I was waiting for. Even the girls were paying extra attention to me.
I saw Aparna coming from a distance. She wore blue jeans and a plain blue top. I hadn't seen her like this before. She looked good. Ok fine, she looked stunning. I already imagined those thirty-five headcounts in our batch who wouldn't spare a moment to check her out. I took my specs out of my left pocket. My heart was beating fast. Maybe, it was because of her tight jeans or her blue top or maybe both.

Someone grabbed me from behind. My heart literally stopped beating. It was Manish. I looked at him. I was more than sure that he had seen me. I just pretended to not look at Aparna as Manish was already staring at her. He never left anything worth exploring unexplored.
'Look there,' he said.
'Where?' I said pretending I had no idea what he was talking.
'He has seen you already,' the inner me said.
'Don't try to act smart. I saw you ok.' he said.
'You saw what?' I said, my voice harsh.

‘That you were stalking her idiot,’ he said.
‘I told you,’ the inner me said.
‘Seriously. Do you think I will do that?’ I said.
I looked at her again pretending that I hadn’t seen her.
‘Who else do you think you were looking at?’ he said.
‘It’s fine. There is nothing wrong in that.’ he added.
‘Shut up.’ I said.
‘She is looking good today,’ I added.
‘Good! Are you serious? She is looking hot.’ Manish said.
‘Manish.’ I grunted. I felt like slapping him.
‘OK.’ he said keeping a pause between O and K.
‘But tell me, Isn’t she?’ he asked.
‘Hmmm,’ I said.
‘Hi Abhi,’ Aparna said. It was the first time she had called me Abhi. I had started noticing her, every time she behaved differently. What work do we have other than this when the girl we like is not straight forward to us.
‘Hi Apu,’ I wanted to say but I didn’t. Boys should never do what girls do. I knew if I call her *Apu* she would react as if *‘how dare you’* even if she would love it. Her Mom calls her Apu. She told me a few days before.
‘Hi.’ I said.
‘Hello.’ Manish said making his eyes bigger than usual. He didn’t even care if she would mind. We entered the class. Mukherjee looked at me and then at Aparna. And then again he looked at me. I ignored. The class was about to start. Aparna and I sat together. The entire batch looked in the direction where we sat down. Aparna didn’t care as usual. There was a huge murmur that had filled the entire space in a few seconds. I wondered what guys at the back seat were busy talking.
‘Focus class.’ Mukherjee said.
I turned around to check what was happening. The entire class looked at Mukherjee and then they all looked at me. Nidhi entered and looked at Aparna. They both smiled. I patted my hands on my head and cursed Nidhi. She was probably the one who had suggested Aparna dress up like that.
‘Why would Nidhi ask her to wear such tight fittings?’
‘It’s ok. Look at her. Isn’t she looking pretty?’ the inner me said.
‘Can’t you see what is going on here?’
‘Ignore them.’
I spent the entire day waiting for the class to get over. There were two

reasons for that. *One*, I wanted to talk to her. *Two*, I knew how many eyeballs in the classroom were rolling. They were not even taking their eyes off her and I knew how badly they hated me at the same time. I had no other choice but to ignore. I looked at Aparna.
‘What happened?’ she asked.
‘Nothing,’ I said.
‘You look distracted,’
‘I am just not getting anything in the class,’
‘Don’t worry. I will give my notes to you. Go through it.’
‘Thanks.’ I said.

In the evening while returning, she insisted me to give her company to the South Indian hotel. I refused. People were staring at her more than usual. She pleaded as she was hungry. I agreed. We entered the hotel. She ordered a veg sandwich along with a coffee. I didn’t take anything. She insisted. I ordered a cup of tea. She ordered some snacks for me too. We didn’t speak much. I wanted to leave from there. We took an auto on our way back to her PG.
‘What happened? You are not even talking to me,’ she said.
‘Nothing as such. I have some work at home,’
‘But you told your family has gone outside,’
‘Except Shruti didi.’
‘How is she?’
‘She is good,’
‘She is the one who takes care of you, right?’
‘She bothers me a lot but,’
‘Can I meet her now?’
‘You will come like this?’
‘Am I not looking good?’ she asked and untied her hair. She looked even more beautiful now. Her silky hairs hit my face as she set them behind her back. She looked happy. The auto driver looked even happier looking at her in the rear-view mirror.
‘It’s ok. I will come some other day,’ she said.
‘No, it’s not like that. You look great,’
‘Thanks.’ she said.
Girls make you speak what they want to.
‘Can I say something?’ I asked.
‘Yes tell me,’

‘All guys in the batch were staring at you,’
‘But why?’
‘Because you are wearing tight clothes. To be frank, it makes you look hot actually.’ I said almost choking myself to death.
Her eyes popped out as she heard the word ‘*hot’*.
‘Thanks for letting me know.’ she said without reacting.
I didn’t dare to speak her after that and dropped her to the PG.

Chapter 4

A week later, I was in my bedroom when a message flashed on my phone ‘*I need to talk to you*’. It was from Aparna. She was probably using her roomie’s phone as she didn’t have one yet. Tears rolled down my eyes. It had nothing to do with the message. I was peeling onions as asked by Mom. She had been complaining for a long time that I don’t help her these days but I guess she was taking more of revenge than help. She was already suspecting me to have something going on with Aparna but she wasn’t sure yet. She was keeping an eye on my phone calls probably. I wiped my tears and was about to reply to Aparna when I saw another message popping in *‘Where Are You? I am Coming’*. I checked the sender’s name. It was from Manish. Two messages from two of the closest people I know at the same time. It was not sinking.
‘Yes Apu, Tell Me.’ I typed but then I stopped.
‘Yes, Tell me.’ I typed and deleted it. It looked very formal.
‘I miss you.’ I typed and deleted it yet again. I was scared as usual. It’s difficult to type a message to the girl you like.
‘Shall I call you?’ I typed and sent it.
‘I am at home. Come at any time.’ I typed another message. I was about to send it to Manish when I saw that I was sending it to Aparna. I lost a few heartbeats as I realized that. She would have judged me and dumped me right away had I sent that message. This is the problem when you get multiple messages at the same time and both of them want you to reply immediately. I carefully checked the message ten times before sending it to Manish.

‘Call me,’ another message popped in. It was from Manish. I was expecting it to be from Aparna. I called and by mistake, I dialled the number from which Aparna messaged. I immediately dropped the call and threw the phone.
‘Oh no. What would she think now?’ I asked the inner me.
‘Bro you are dead,’ the inner me said.
‘Shall I message saying it was by mistake,’
‘Yes do it now. She should not feel you are a despo.’
‘Will call you in sometime Abhi. It’s my friend’s phone actually,’ the message read. It was from Aparna.
‘I am waiting.’ I replied immediately when I heard someone knocking at the door.
‘Manish is there.’ Mom said with an expression as she peeped into my room. It was an indication to stop peeling onions or else what would my best friend think of her. Ladies and expressions are mutually exclusive. I continued peeling onions.
‘Why are you crying?’ Manish said as he entered.
‘Look down you idiot,’ I said.
‘I have news,’ he said.
‘Bark,’ I said.
‘Abhi,’ he said grunting.
‘Ok tell,’ I said politely. I wiped my tears again.
‘Aparna told something to Nidhi,’
‘So!’ I said not interested as usual.
‘Aparna asked about you damn it.’ he said. My eyes, ears, fingers raised in sync. I left everything as it is. I folded my knees, lifted it a little and pivoted my elbows on them.
‘Tell me now,’ I said feeling relaxed. I had all the time in the world now. It was the first step towards my love story which she took.
‘She asked about your birthday,’
‘Seriously?’ I said, my eyes popped out.
‘But that is gone long back,’ I said.
‘She doesn’t know that?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘We know that your birthday is gone but Aparna doesn’t know,’
‘What did Nidhi tell her then?’ I asked intriguingly.
‘That your birthday is next month,’

‘Holy crap. Why would Nidhi do something like that Idiot? What if Aparna finds out?’
‘Ok, see you later,’ he said. He looked angry. Of course, he would be. His girlfriend was doing so much for me.
‘Ok, I am sorry. Tell me what did she say?’ I asked politely.
‘I want to plan something for his birthday,’ Manish said.
‘Holy shit! But she behaves as if she hardly bothers about me,’
‘Exactly. All girls are the same,’ he said.
‘So, what shall we do now?’
‘Relax,’ he said, ‘Tell her everything,’
‘Are you out of your mind?’ I said.
‘Why can’t you be daring for once in your life? Loser,’
‘Bro, my brain doesn’t work in front of her. Moreover, she confuses me every time goddamn it. I am just scared.’
‘We are writing a letter to her then.’
‘Manish, you will get me into trouble,’ I yelled, my heart thumping.
‘Not a good idea. We are in the twenty-first century you see,’ I added.
‘Ok, so I am fine if you can tell her directly,’
‘Not in this, birth I guess,’
‘Then keep that twenty-first-century shit with yourself. You are the only guy I know who can’t tell his feelings to a girl who already likes him.’ he said. He made me write a letter. It was the best letter anyone could have even thought of writing.
‘But I am not giving this to her,’ I said. I was already getting goose-bumps reading the letter.
‘Idiot, when was the last time you did something daring?’
‘When I wrote the supplement maths paper for you and didn’t get caught,’ I said immediately.
‘Seriously?’ he said as if it meant nothing to him.
‘You know what is the most daring thing that I have done?’
‘What?’ I asked curiously.
‘I met Nidhi’s Mom.’ he said. I felt ashamed of myself.
‘Are you serious?’
‘Of course,’ he said.
‘Where do you get the balls man to do all this?’ I asked.
‘Abhi, we all are scared but that doesn’t mean we will stop doing things. If I won’t do then who will do that for her. It took me, ten girls, to realize what

love is. You understood it with just one girl. How can you take that risk of letting her go?'
'No ways,' I said.
'So you are giving the letter?' he asked again.
'Bro, I am scared but,' I said.
'She likes you and you know that. Can you do it for her, if not for yourself?' he asked.
'Ok fine. I got it.' I said.
'We will keep it in a notebook and give it to her,' he said.
'Manish you will get me into trouble,' I said.
'Keep this in the last page,' he continued ignoring what I said.
'Why can't I give her myself?' I asked.
'It doesn't work that way. Let her find for herself.' he said.
'Shall I tell her that there is a letter on the last page when I give her the notebook?' I asked.
'Bro, are you really nuts?' he said, irritatingly.
'Now what happened?' I asked.
'You don't have to tell her anything. Let her find it for herself. Dumbass,' he said.
'Manish.' I grunted. He gave me a look without caring about how I felt. It was like someone has asked me to sit on a grenade and I am not even supposed to panic. I got a message from Aparna after some time saying she would talk to me tomorrow. Meanwhile, my onions were gone into the kitchen. It was 8 p.m. and Manish was getting late.
'Manish, I need to talk to you,' Mom said. We sat at the dinner table.
'Who Is this Aparna?' she asked. I looked at Manish with that '*Don't you dare say anything stupid*' expression.
'Which Aparna aunty?' he asked. Damn it! I forgot to tell him that I had already told Mom that she is his friend.
'But Abhi was saying that,' Mom said when I interrupted.
'Hey, that Aparna who is your friend,' I said and winked at him. He gave me a dead look.
'Oh, Aparna!' he said rolling his eyes. He was overacting.
'Idiot, Rascal.' I abused him in my head.
'Aunty, she is beautiful.' he said.
'Shut the crap Manish or I am going to kill you.' I mumbled within looking at the knife kept on the table. No one was asking him for her matrimonial

column descriptions. He could have said that *she is a very simple girl and hardly talks to any guy.*
'I know that already.' Mom said and looked at me with '*That's why my son is mad about her*' expression. I smiled like a loser.
'Aunty, you should meet her once,' Manish said.
I felt like punching him on the face. I was looking for something to hide when Mom looked at me. I focussed on my protein ridden food with ghee floating all over my dal.
'Mom, please give some curry to Manish,' I said to dodge the topic.
'His dad will meet her.' Mom said. Manish giggled when someone knocked. Mom got up to open the door.
'Bro you are dead,' he said.
'She had been eyeing on me for a few weeks already. She knows a few things and you almost told her everything by saying that '*she is beautiful*'.
Who asked you to say that?' I asked angrily.
He giggled. Dad came in and looked at me as if Mom just told everything to him in those mini seconds. Mom didn't get time to sneak peek as she got busy with Mili Didi's marriage conversation with dad. There was a slight change in the plan that gave me a little relief. Manish was giving the letter to Aparna as Mili didi's would-be in-laws were visiting us the next day to meet her. I had to be at home. It was the first love cum arrange marriage in my family. Dad was fine with it. Mom, as usual, made a lot of noise in the beginning but when she saw the guy is having a government job she gave up.

The next day, I was asked to arrange a lot of things before the boy's family arrived. We were expecting only three of them, Mili Didi's would-be *Anuj* and his parents but they were accompanied by Anuj's two cousin sisters who were checking me out in my traditional outfit. They were beautiful. They came with their parents too, who showed their extra teeth when I greeted them.

There were huge baskets with sweets which had occupied half of our kitchen space. Mom showed the boy's family our entire house and Mili didi's childhood pictures where she didn't look this fat. She showed them the furniture work that was going on before the marriage. They even had some quality fifteen minutes where Mom showed a few sarees, she was planning to give them on the day of marriage. Anuj's mother didn't seem like the typical mother in-laws we see in movies. She was not that scary.

She was happy with everything except the fact that we were spending more than it was needed. She wanted a simple marriage for her son but since Mili didi was our eldest sister, Mom wanted the marriage to be a grand one.

I was meanwhile occupied from switching on the fans to running the generators every time the current was gone due to some maintenance work going on in our locality. Every two minutes, I could listen to the guests bursting into laughter. I had to serve all the beverages. I felt like a newly married bride in that small time I spent with them. Worst part being, I was doing all this in that tight kurta pajama which I was wearing. I was too busy to think about anything but still, the one thing that was bothering me was, *Did she even read the letter? Will it be a yes or a no? What if it is a no? Will I be even able to face her?*

But then there was another side of me which was thinking *what if she says yes, Will I be able to accept the fact that I never had the courage to say this to her face to face?* She will laugh at me for the rest of her life if she says yes. And I would spend the rest of my life justifying myself that it was Manish who asked me to write a letter. She might laugh even more after that.

The only two things I was looking at, was the phone and the wall clock. Every time the phone rang, my heart was pounding really fast thinking it was her. Before even anyone could reach the phone, I was taking every call. I felt like calling her myself but rewinding those words written in the letter, I stopped. It was 5:50 p.m. in the evening when the boy's family was about to leave but Mom asked them to stay for some more time. And due to my mom's extra hospitality, they stayed back for another hour. I wanted to talk to Manish and ask him *what exactly happened? Was there anything he told to her? Was there anything she asked about me when they met today? Did she ask why I didn't come to meet her?*

I was not able to focus on anything. The boy's family left after sometime when I stole a glance at my phone. I immediately dialled to Manish but he didn't receive it. I tried a couple of times again but he still didn't. '*Pick up the phone damn it,'*.

I wanted to hear something good that could make me happy. I was tensed, really tensed. I checked if there was any message from her. It wasn't there. I was expecting a call from her too. An hour had passed. I was walking restlessly in my room looking sometimes at the floor and most of the time at the ceiling. It was already three hours when my phone finally rang . I ran

to pick it up. It was Manish.
‘Did she say anything?’ I asked.
‘She wants to talk to you. She just called me asking who wrote the letter,’ he said. I lost a heartbeat.
‘She seemed angry,’ he added even further.
‘Don’t tell me. I told you don’t make me do that.’ I said.
‘Look, only she knows what made her upset,’
‘Because she was not expecting that from me,’
‘I don’t think so,’
‘Then why would she be angry?’
‘I don’t get it. When she likes you so much, why would she take you otherwise? She should be happy that you told her about your feelings,’
‘No, it’s not like that Manish. She might have thought she will take things slowly and we messed up everything. Now she might be wondering I am just like every other guy,’
‘What the hell do you mean?’
‘Did you at least tell her that you wrote it?’. He didn’t reply.
‘Don’t tell me you told her that I did it. You are going to ruin everything, Manish,’ I said.
‘I told her I didn’t write it. I had no option.’
‘Are you bloody serious? Do you think there is some joke going on here? Do you have any idea what have you done?’
‘Don’t worry. She will be alright,’ he said.
‘What would I say when she calls me now?’
‘Just tell her that you wrote that letter for someone else,’ he said. I felt like banging my head on the wall.
‘So, now you want me to say something after which I might end up losing her forever,’
‘Tell me then, how shall I help you?’ Manish asked.
‘I don’t need your help anymore,’
‘Then what do you want me to do?’
‘Tell her that you wrote the letter for Nidhi and you left it in the book by mistake. Anyways we haven’t put any name over there,’
‘Makes sense but what if Nidhi gets to know about this and she thinks that I wrote this letter for someone else. Look she doesn’t trust me still. She keeps complaining every time I talk to any other girl. Moreover, I have already proposed her Abhi. So, it doesn’t make sense to write a letter.’

‘Don’t you dare talk about what makes sense. I will handle all that. But do as I say,’ I said. He didn’t reply.
‘You there? Look you have created the whole mess and you need to fix up everything now.’ I added.
‘Hmmm, but I won’t be able to tell Aparna if Nidhi is there,’
‘Because you are scared to lose her? Do you have any idea how scared I am right now?’ I said when I saw another call coming.
‘Holy shit.’ I mumbled. It was Aparna.
‘What happened?’
‘Keep the phone, Manish. I will call you later. Aparna is there,’
‘Ok don’t panic. Just talk to her casually,’
‘Will you keep the phone now? And don’t forget what I have told you.’ I said when he disconnected the call.
‘Hi,’ I said controlling my breath which was heavy.
‘Where are you?’ she asked, her voice sounding different than every time she spoke to me earlier.
‘Anything important?’ I asked.
I had never asked a more foolish question than this before.
‘Yes, it is. I need to talk to you,’ she said. I looked around thinking of an excuse to escape the topic.
‘Listen, I am busy, have few guests at home. Can we talk later?’
‘Sure.’ she said and kept the call. I cursed myself. I shouldn’t have listened to Manish. He ruined everything. I couldn’t even sleep for the whole night.
The next day, I came to the institute but I didn’t want to. She was waiting for me near the gate. I smiled as I looked at her. She didn’t. She looked upset. She wore a green top and denim jeans.
‘Why she has to look so beautiful? Will she ask me, how she looks today because I want her to.’ I was talking to myself.
‘I hope everything goes fine. She should not react.’ I kept on talking in my head. Manish was about to reach in some time.
‘Shall we go inside?’ I asked.
‘No, wait. I need to talk to you,’ she said. I saw the book which I had returned to her. I got a mini heart attack seeing it.
‘Who wrote this?’ she asked showing me the letter. I looked at it and then read it as if it was written in *Greek and Latin*. I had no other option. I was just waiting for Manish to come before I utter a word and things get worse.
‘Who wrote it?’ I asked pretending as if I had no idea about it when I saw

Manish coming.
‘*Now everything is going to be fine. He will tell her the truth.’* I told to myself. Aparna didn’t say a word. She kept looking at me.
‘Hi,’ Manish said looking at both of us. He smiled. We didn’t. He had no idea, I was about to get a stroke if Aparna would have asked ‘*Who wrote the letter*’ once again.
‘What happened? You guys look serious,’ he asked as if he had no clue what he had done. Aparna took the letter from my hand and gave it to him.
‘Look Aparna, I know you felt bad but it was not him. I myself asked him to write the letter when he kept telling, he doesn’t want to do that. He wanted to tell you everything upfront but I told him not to, thinking you might react.’ he said
Aparna looked at me. I smiled. And then she looked at the letter.
‘Can you even imagine he can do something like that? I am sorry that I didn’t tell you the truth yesterday,’ Manish added.
‘I knew it was not him,’ she said and smiled this time.
‘*Stop dreaming idiot and look at Manish. He is not even lifting his head.’* the inner me said when I looked at Manish again.
He read the letter just like I did. He was overacting.
Come on Manish tell her who wrote it. He looked at me and then he looked at Aparna. I had no idea what was going in his mind.
‘Don’t you dare mess things here Manish?’ I told in my head.
‘The content is good,’ he said smiling.
‘What do you mean?’ Aparna asked. She was still angry.
‘I mean the content in the letter is good,’ he repeated when we saw Nidhi coming.
‘It’s funny for you. Isn’t it?’ Aparna asked.
‘Holy shit,’ I said in my head. Nidhi came closer. Manish tried to hide the letter but he couldn’t. There was no point anyway.
‘It’s ok Manish, there is no point hiding it now,’ Aparna said as Nidhi reached closer to us. Aparna took the letter from him and passed to Nidhi as if it was a manuscript of some movie.
‘Read it please.’ she said as though Nidhi wouldn’t have read it if she hadn’t asked her to. Nidhi took the letter from Manish. I felt like running between those vehicles on the road. She looked at Aparna and then she looked at me as she was done reading.
‘Who wrote this?’ Nidhi asked.

I looked at Manish. My throat was turning dry.
‘Abhishek wrote it,’ he said blatantly. Aparna looked at me and I looked at Manish when he continued speaking.
‘I had no idea about all this. Abhishek just asked me to return the book to you. I am sorry.’ he added.
‘Seriously?’ I said in my head not knowing what to tell.
Aparna looked at me with disgust.
‘Hope he doesn’t repeat that,’ she said. I didn’t like what she said. At least she should have known that I cannot do that.
‘So you don’t like him right?’ he asked. Aparna didn’t reply.
Who told him to ask that. Why can’t he understand these things?
‘Then there is no point keeping this letter.’ he said.
He took the letter from Nidhi and tore it into pieces.

I left immediately as I had no clue what he was going to do next. The girl who knew me so well didn’t take a moment before judging me. I felt disgusted. I entered the classroom. The entire batch looked at me as if they were searching for someone else. I guess, I knew what they were looking for. I sat on the last bench. Anyways, she wouldn’t have sat with me. Aparna, Manish, and Nidhi came a little later. Aparna looked at me. I looked away. She sat on the front bench. Manish and Nidhi sat on the second. Manoj from the batch entered and sat beside Aparna. The entire batch looked at Manoj and then they turned around and look at me. I cursed all of them. Aparna got up from her seat and looked at Manish. He got up and looked at me. I hardly cared. Aparna sat with Nidhi. Manish came and sat beside me. Mukherjee entered the class and looked at me. He smiled. I didn’t.

He announced the mock test results. I had topped the entire batch. Mukherjee looked at me probably wondering what happened and why I am so serious. I faked a smile at him. He smiled too. I was not happy. On one end, I wanted to celebrate it but on the other, there was no one I even wanted to talk to. Everyone I trusted had put me down. Manish patted me on my back and congratulated me. I faked a smile at him but didn’t say a word. Aparna came and congratulated me after the class. I didn’t respond. Nidhi congratulated me through a message. I didn’t reply back.
After the class, they asked me to join them for the south Indian hotel to celebrate. I told him I have a headache and left from there. I came back to my home. I wanted to sleep and forget everything that had happened. I

couldn’t. Shruti didi asked, why I look upset and if I needed something. I asked her to switch off the light and leave as I had a headache. She didn’t say a word and left. But I wanted to talk to her and tell her what I was going through.

I started hating to attend Mukherjee’s class anymore. I would talk less with Manish but I would respond to him. I had stopped blaming him for what had happened. I completely started avoiding Aparna. Nidhi anyways didn’t have time for all this. She had Manish to look after. After the class, Aparna would wait for me to join her in the same auto as we used to before but I would take a separate one. I was not comfortable to show my face to her. What would I say, if she tries to talk to me? I won’t even feel like responding to her because I would know, that I love this girl who is sitting beside me but I might have to pretend that I don’t. It was difficult. Sometimes I would look at my phone wondering, why can’t she call me and talk to me if she wants to fix all this. She should know it is not easy for me to face her now.

She would try to approach me after the classes if I was at a medical shop or a book shop. I would just ignore her and leave. She would even call my name but I won’t care to even look back, stop and talk to her. She had no idea, what I was going through. If she had, she wouldn’t have done what she had already.

‘Hope he doesn’t repeat that,’ these words kept echoing in my head. It sounded as if she never had any respect for me.

I didn’t feel like blaming her either. She just did what she felt was right. I didn’t know what happened after that. Why she has to even talk to me and behave as if she had made some mistake. I wanted to give her space so that she can feel comfortable. I wanted to see her happy as she used to, every time before. But she had stopped smiling. I wanted to ask her if she was doing fine but I was scared if she takes me otherwise again. But still, I wanted to tell her how badly I care for her. I started hating myself. I would come back to my room and curse myself for ignoring her. I had no other option. Mili didi’s marriage talks were nearing. I was not going to invite Aparna to get her acquainted with my family. I didn’t repent. Shit happens but the problem is we don’t know how to handle and fix it. Even if we want to fix it our ego comes in between.

A month had passed. I was with Mili didi at the Mantapa where her marriage was supposed to happen. After refusing almost every marriage

hall, she had finalized one. I had informed Manish that I would need his help as Gandhi Bhaiya was out of the station and was returning after a week but he didn't turn up.

We went through the checklist the Mantapa officials had prepared for things they will be looking after. Mili didi got busy with the registrar regarding some advance payment we had to make for the proceedings when I got a message on my phone.

'I need to talk to you,' it read. It was from Aparna.

'Yes tell me,' I replied.

'I am sorry,'

'It's ok,' I replied, keeping my conversation short.

'No, I mean it. I am really sorry,'

'It's ok. I did a mistake and I got the answer,' I messaged.

'It's not like that. I didn't want to hurt you and you know that,'

'Who said I am hurt?' I asked. Maybe I was overreacting.

'Look, I can see it. I know you didn't do anything. I know I misunderstood you. Nidhi told me everything about what happened. Manish told her the truth. He wanted to explain this to me in person but he was scared if I would react?' she messaged.

'Good, that you got to know the truth and great that you finally got convinced by others to believe me. I am happy for you.' I messaged. I had to type that last sentence.

'But I am not.' she replied.

'Now what happened?' I messaged.

'I haven't seen you for a week. I want to meet you.'

'Yes, we will meet in Mukherjee's class tomorrow. I was busy with Mili didi's marriage.'

'Not in class Abhi. Can't we meet outside?'

'Yes call Manish and Nidhi as well,'

'Are you nuts?' she messaged.

'Anything wrong I replied this time?' I messaged.

'Yes you did,'

'Please tell me,'

'When someone is saying something indirectly, you need to understand that,' she messaged.

'Last time I tried to understand when you messed it up,'

'I said, I am sorry for that,' she messaged. I didn't reply.

‘So you coming?’ she messaged further.
‘I told you, call Manish and Nidhi too. And then inform me,’
‘When was the last time you used your brain Abhi? I want to meet only you,’ she messaged.
‘Why can’t you be direct? Why can’t you accept it if you have anything for me?’ I messaged.
‘I can’t and that’s it. If you want to understand then do so or keep pretending that you don’t understand a thing I am trying to tell you,’ she messaged.
‘Sorry I am not getting anything,’ I messaged.
‘Ok fine. Don’t understand and don’t come. Enjoy in Mili didi’s marriage alone,’ she messaged
‘Bye.’ she messaged a second later. I didn’t reply.
‘Ok fine, I am coming.’ I messaged after a minute of guilt and anger. No reply came from the other end. I felt like an idiot.
‘I knew you would come. I will call you in some time and let you know the venue,’ she messaged.
A smile came on my face.
‘Hmmm.’ I messaged.
‘Who are you messaging for such a long time? I was calling you,’ Mili didi said.
‘No one. Are we done?’ I asked.
‘No, I have to buy a few gifts. We need to go to the city market.’ she said. I looked at her shopping bag. She had already made me roam half of the city and still, she had to go shopping.
‘But Mom said we need to be there by 3 p.m,’ I said.
‘I called Mom and informed her we will be late,’ Mili didi said.
I looked at my phone expecting the venue details.
‘Stop staring at your phone. Whom are you chatting with by the way?’ she asked.
‘No one. Let’s leave.’ I said. On my way home, I got a message from Aparna about the venue details.

The next day, I had to meet Mili didi’s would-be-in-laws to deliver the gifts she had bought a day before. I didn’t know that those gifts were for them. I had no clue what excuse to make now when Aparna calls me. Had Manish been here, I would have handled everything. He was supposed to come to my home but he got stuck in some work at the last moment.

Mili didi and I reached her in-laws' place around 1 p.m. I told her that we will leave immediately after giving the gifts. But her in-laws insisted that we must sit for the Puja which they had conducted for Anuj. Everything was going against me. I had to meet Aparna by 5 p.m. but I had no idea if I would be able to make it. Seeing the crowd and the Puja, I was getting mini heart attacks. Mili didi forced me to help her in-laws and got me into another trouble. She just wanted to spend some quality time with Anuj or I should rather say Anuj wanted to spend some quality time with her. They were behaving like long-time lovers who had met after centuries. Since she had arrived, Anuj's focus was more on her and less on the Puja. I had no doubt it was all planned by both of them a day before and they chose me as the scapegoat for this. Who does that? It was just a few days left and they will be together forever after that. I was cursing myself every second sitting there. I felt like an idiot.

At 4: 30 p.m, I got a message from Aparna. *'I am leaving now. Be there on time'*. Damn it! I missed reading that message as I was busy serving food to the guests.

'She will never speak to me if I mess this time. She will never forgive me if I don't turn up today. Shall I leave from here? How do I inform her, she doesn't even have a phone. I shouldn't have come here. Damn it, she will keep waiting, thinking I am coming to meet her.'

At 5: 15 p.m, I got a call from her.

'Where are you? Did you reach?' she said.

'There is no point lying. Tell her the truth.'

'Actually, I am still at Mili didi's in-laws' place. I forgot to inform you that,' I said.

'So you not coming. Is it?' she asked.

'I mean I am trying but it will be too late by the time I reach there,' I said.

'I don't think you will be able to come. It's ok. No issue.' she said and kept the call. I felt like banging my head on the pillar close to me. I was angry at Anuj, Mili didi, and even her in-laws. In fact, I was angry on Mom too who told me to accompany her.

I hate these rituals where brother has to be around his sister every time she keeps her feet outside the home after an engagement. Are people nuts? I was angry at Gandhi Bhaiya too, who was not here. We reached home late at night. I didn't receive any message from her except that one message from Manish where he told me that he was leaving for Dhanbad the next

day as his dad was not doing well. I didn't even reply to him back.
I made her wait for so long. How bad she might be feeling?
I had no idea how to fix this mess which I created now. I can't even call her and explain. She had told me not to call on her friend's number. She would call or message me if needed. I was really screwed this time. She had spoken politely on the phone. And when a girl replies politely even if she is angry then you should know you are in deep shit.
In the evening the next day, I got a call on my mobile. It was from Aparna's Dhanbad number. I had no clue who was calling from the other side.
'Did she tell everything to her parents?'
'No, she won't tell them,' the inner me said.
'But if she didn't tell them then who is calling me from this number?'
'Manish might have told them,'
'Oh yes. Is that why he's leaving for Dhanbad tonight? Did he lie that his dad is not well?'
'But why would he go there if he told them everything? Doesn't make sense,'
'If he hasn't told them anything, then how come I am getting calls from her parents?'

My mind stopped working. It had already rung three times but I didn't pick up the phone when Mom heard it, as it rang for the fourth time. She scolded me, why was I not picking it up. She had no idea what huge a mess it would be if I do that.
'It would be even a bigger mess if your Mom picks up the call,' the inner me said.
'Oh yes. She will kill me if she gets to know about all this.'

Slowing down my breath and heartbeat, I picked up the phone.
'Abhi, why you have to take so much time to pick up the phone?' the voice said. It was Aparna.
'It was you. I was so scared.' I said.
'What did I do now?' she asked.
'No nothing but why are you calling on the mobile?' I asked.
'You only told me to call you on the mobile in the evening and on your landline in the morning. You confuse me so much that I forget what to do,'
'I am sorry, I forgot,' I said.
'Hmmm. If you free can we talk?' she said politely. I had no idea how she didn't sound angry.

‘Yes tell me, I am listening,’ I said even more politely.
‘No need to be formal. I know you must be busy again,’
‘Hey no. I am sorry about yesterday. It wasn’t intentional,’
‘Did I say anything about yesterday? Why do you need to bring topics that make me upset?’
‘What are you doing in Dhanbad but?’ I asked.
‘At least people care for me here,’ she said.
‘People care for you over here as well.’
‘Excuse me!’ she said, her voice firm. I lost a heartbeat.
‘No, I mean,’
‘Oh please don’t mean anything. Last time you meant something and you stood me up,’
‘Why is she bringing the topic now?’ I asked myself.
‘I didn’t get you,’ I said.
‘Yes, that’s so nice of you. You don’t get anything,’
‘Look on one side you say, don’t bring the topic and on the other side you bring up the same topic.’
‘When did I bring the topic. You started it right?’
‘Yes but then I shut it too. You were not supposed to talk about it after that. Isn’t it?’ I asked.
‘Yes because I want to mess things up. I am the one who asks a girl to wait somewhere and never turn up. And then they don’t even bother to inform her that they won’t be coming,’
‘You know how busy I was,’
‘Do you know how busy I was? But still, I came there to meet you. I was leaving for Dhanbad last night.’
‘So you called to fight with me?’ I asked.
‘Am I fighting?’ she asked irritatingly.
‘No, you are not. I am.’
‘Yes, you are and you are good at messing up things. I planned everything so well and what you did. Just messed it up,’
‘I am saying sorry again,’
‘Yes, that’s good. Say sorry. It’s the easiest thing to do,’
‘You did the same. Don’t forget,’
‘That was because of misunderstanding but this one was purposely. You wanted me to feel bad.’
‘Excuse me. How can you even think like that? I wanted to meet you today

but you are not even here. What do I do?'
'Oh please. I know how much you want to meet me. If that was the case you would have called me for once.'
'I didn't even know you were in Dhanbad. How do you expect me to call you?'
'You could have checked from Nidhi,' she said.
'Do you have any idea how embarrassed I feel right now?' she added.
'Now what do you want me to do?' I asked.
'Please don't do anything.'
'I was planning to meet you today. If you were here, I would have met you.'
'I thought of informing you that I was coming here if we had met yesterday. But when someone treats you like an idiot, its better you keep things to yourself.'
'But I really wanted to meet you today,'
'When I was there, you didn't care to meet me. Now when I am here, it's easy to say that you wanted to meet me even if you don't want to.'
'When are you coming back? Tell me,' I said politely.
'No need. I will come back when I feel like,'
'Excuse me. It's Nidhi's birthday next week,'
'She is not my girlfriend,' she said.
'But at least we all can meet and spend some time together,'
'That's your problem. You have time for her birthday but you don't have time to meet me,'
'Ok fine I got it. I will meet you then. And don't you tell me that why did I meet you this time.'
'I am not there anymore. You know that,' she said.
'It's ok. It's my problem,'
'Whatever. I am not going to trust you this time,' she said and kept the phone. She was really angry.
'What do I do now? Shall I go to Dhanbad with Manish? What if she reacts when she sees me there?'
'Do you have a choice?' the inner me said.
'But what will I tell Manish?'
'Tell him that you want to meet uncle.'
I called Manish immediately.
'What time is our train?' I asked.
'What happened?'

‘I need to meet your dad. Mom asked to accompany you,’
‘It’s ok, you take care of Mili didi’s marriage,’
‘It’s fine, I will come with you,’
‘Are you all right? I told you, it is ok. I can go alone,’ he said.
‘I just want to spend some time with you,’
‘Don’t worry. I will meet you once I am back,’
‘Is he really an idiot?’ I told to myself.
‘When I am saying something, why can’t you understand? You know how busy I am these days,’
‘That’s why I am saying you stay here and I will go,’
‘Have you taken the tickets?’
‘No, I am leaving now to get one,’
‘It’s ok. I will take it. Meet me at the station.’ I said and disconnected the call. I informed the same to Dad. He asked me a few questions but he nodded at the end. I even asked him to inform the same to Mom. She was outside and I had no doubt she wouldn’t have allowed me to leave. It was just a matter of a day and I will be back but Mom wouldn’t have understood.

I packed my bag and left for the station. Manish called and informed me that he had taken the tickets already. He asked me hundreds of questions as I reached the station, that how I was so keen to meet his dad. I kept answering him that I just wanted to spend some time with him. I had no other option.
Had I told him that Aparna was there, he would have called Nidhi and informed. And Nidhi would have called Aparna and informed the same.

I didn’t want to mess up anything this time. We reached Vinod uncle’s place early morning. He was shocked to see me and told that I shouldn’t have wasted my time visiting him.
How do I explain to him that I was here to see someone else who stays just a few blocks away from him but I had no idea how would I meet her now?
‘If her dad would be there, I will not meet her,’ I told to the inner me.
‘Is that why you have come here for? Why didn’t you think about this before?’ the inner me asked.
‘I was in a hurry goddamn it. The only thing that was running in my mind was that Manish is leaving and I need to go with him anyhow,’ I replied to the inner me.
‘Leave all that. Tell me how do I find out that her dad is here or not?’ I

asked the inner me.
‘Call her idiot.’
I dialled her number but there was no response when finally after five calls Aparna received it.
‘Why were you not picking up your phone?’ I asked.
‘I did now, right?’ she said as if she was still angry with me.
‘Why can’t you talk to me properly?’
‘What more do you want? I am at least talking to you after what you did. Isn’t that enough?’
‘I have come here just to meet you but the only thing that matters to you is to show attitude.’
‘Excuse me, I don’t have any attitude,’
‘Ok fine. It’s better that I return.’
‘Did you just say you are here?’ she asked.
‘No, I didn’t. And now even if I am here I won’t meet you,’
‘Abhi are you serious? You are here. When did you come?’
‘You think I don’t want to meet you right? Then so be it,’
‘Oh no. Not at all. I am sorry. I was angry. Where are you?’
‘I am at Vinod uncle’s place.’ I said, still a little angry,
‘Wait, I will come and meet you,’ she said.
‘Even Manish is here,’
‘What? What is going on Abhi? How come he is here now?’
‘He came to meet his dad,’
‘How come you are here then?’
‘I told him, I had to meet his dad too,’ I said.
‘But I wanted to meet someone else,’ I added. She chuckled.
‘Funny right? I am an idiot that I came here,’
‘No, I am really happy that you came.’
‘Then what time you will come to meet us?’
‘In the evening around 6. Is that fine?’
‘My returning train is at 11 p.m. That should be fine.’
‘I will come with Mom too.’
‘But why do you need to get your Mom?’
‘I will have to explain things here if I don’t come with her,’
‘How about me coming to your place?’ I asked.
‘No ways. You know my brothers,’
‘I understand.’

‘And how about uncle?’ I asked.
‘He is outside. He will be back next week.’
‘Cool then, I will be waiting.’ I said and kept the call. It was 5:30 p.m. when I got a call from her.
‘Do you want me to bring something for you?’ she asked.
‘What do you mean?’ I asked.
‘I mean something you want to eat. You guys must be hungry.’
‘We cooked. So don’t worry. Just come fast.’
‘I will be there soon.’
‘Great,’ I said. Manish looked at me as I kept the phone.
‘What do you want now?’ I asked.
‘Aparna.’ he said when I looked at him and felt like breaking the vase on his head.
‘I mean, why isn’t Nidhi like Aparna?’ he clarified.
‘How would I know?’
‘I feel jealous of you.’ he said.
‘Shut up. Uncle might hear.’ I said.
‘And why is she coming here by the way?’
‘To meet your dad. You have a problem with that too?’
‘Stop lying. I know why you are here,’
‘No, you don’t know. I really wanted to see if your dad is doing good,’ I said trying to sound real. He glared at me.
‘Ok, I came here to meet her as well,’ I added. He further glared at me. A deeper one this time.
‘Ok fine. I came here to meet only her. Happy now?’ I said
‘No, I am not. You could have informed me,’
‘You know why I didn’t. You hardly keep things to yourself,’
‘Ok fine. When is she coming?’ he asked.
‘In a few minutes, she will be here,’ I said when Vinod uncle called him. The doorbell rang at 6 p.m. I opened the door. Aparna wore a green salwar kameez and aunty wore a purple silk saree. Manish came to the door and greeted both of them inside.

Aparna and her mom sat on the sofa. Manish and I sat on the chair along with Vinod uncle. He was scolding Manish in front of us because he left everything and came to meet him. Aunty defended him, saying ‘*After all Manish is your son. He might be worried*’. Vinod uncle scolded me too for accompanying his son for which aunty said ‘*It’s ok. It’s good that Manish*

has a friend like me'. I looked at her daughter who was smiling. I felt relieved. I finally kept my promise. Aparna and her mom left after some time as aunty had to do her evening Puja.
My phone buzzed after a few minutes. It was Aparna. She had reached her flat.
'Before you leave, I want to tell you something.' she said.
'Yes, go ahead.' I said.
'Thanks for coming.' she said.
'It's ok. Now you know I was not lying to you.' I said.
'Yes, I know that. And I want to tell you one more thing.'
'Please tell me before Manish comes here,' I said.
'If Manish wouldn't have torn that letter, I would have replied,'
'And what would have been the reply?' I asked.
'Do I need to tell that?' she asked. I smiled.
'Go safely and call me once you reach. I will keep now, Mom is calling to attend the Puja.' she said.
'Why can't we talk more?' I asked.
'Because I have to go.' she said.
'But I don't want to keep the call.' I said.
'It's ok. We will talk once you reach.' she said and kept the call. I returned back the same night . We could not meet each other for another two weeks.

The only source of contact was our phone, where we would talk for hours. She even made me speak to her mom a couple of times where I wouldn't have much to speak and I would end up getting blessings from her. On the day she was returning, she told me she has a surprise for me. On asking what it was, she said she is coming back and we were finally meeting. The next day, I could barely stay at home. I was checking my phone every time waiting for her call. I had already told Mili did that I had some work in the evening. So, I won't be available at which she threw a glance as though she owned me for all her work now. The phone finally rang.
'Abhi, see who is there?' Mom shouted from the other room.
'Your future daughter in law.' I wanted to say but I didn't.
I don't know, how she could see and hear things from even that good a distance. I received the phone.
'Hi, Can we talk?' she said.
'We are already talking,' I said.
'Very funny,' she said.

‘Missed me?’ she asked.
‘Not really,’ I said.
‘Oh please. I know you,’ she said.
‘Then why do you ask?’ I said. She giggled.
I was dancing in my room while talking to her. I forgot that my door was open when Mom saw me stirring my feet like an idiot alone. I immediately took my eyes off her and closed the door. Aparna was still on the call and there was no mute button on my phone which was needed badly. Mom knocked at my door when I heard Aparna calling my name on the phone ‘*Abhi Abhi’* but I preferred to respond to the lady in front of me than to the lady on the phone. Our future depended on her approval after all. I opened it immediately.
‘Yes, Mumma,’ I said smiling.
‘What were you doing?’ she asked, her voice firm.
‘Nothing, why?’ I asked, pretending I had no idea what I was doing a few seconds back. She kept looking at me.
‘I was just practicing for Mili didi’s marriage.’ I said faking a smile at her. She looked at me with disgust and left. I had no idea why. I returned to the call where someone was waiting for me.
‘Hi, Sorry Mom was there,’ I said forgetting that my phone was not on mute. She didn’t say a word for exactly five seconds when she burst into laughter suddenly. Maybe she heard what Mom said and she even heard what I replied to Mom.
‘What an idiot I am?’ I told to myself.
‘Hmmm, someone was dancing, is it?’ she said and laughed again.
‘Are you done?’ I asked.
‘Yes I am done,’ she said still smiling on the other side I guess.
She asked, what I did for the whole day and enquired everything about Mili didi’s marriage.
‘Ok listen, I need to go now. And we are meeting in the evening. I will message the venue in some time.’ she said.
‘And don’t you dare not come this time,’ she added.
‘I won’t.’ I said and kept the call.

Chapter 5

@CAFE - COFFEE AND FRIENDS

I came before time but she was late. I was looking at every face around me. I had never stalked people like a retard before. What to do? I had no other way to kill time. I had even got a novel in my hand which Aparna had asked me to read but it was not happening. She wanted it back today.

I kept looking at my watch begging it to hit 5 p.m. I mean, I still had to wait for thirty minutes. I knew she didn't do this intentionally but there was no better way to take revenge either. She finally arrived looking everywhere around the cafe. She wore tight black jeans and a purple top. Every guy in the cafe looked at her and then they looked at me.

'I am sorry.' she said as she sat beside me.

'It's fine. I knew you will be late.'

'And how did you know that?'

'Oh please, all girls are the same. The only thing that you can't manage is time.'

'And who said that?' she asked.

'Don't tell me, Manish told you that?' she added. I smiled.

'Stop listening to him so much. I have no idea what and all the things he has told you about girls.'

'Even the fact that which colour dress you girls will wear on which day, he knows it all.'

'Do you have anything else to discuss apart from all this?'

'Because we see, how particular you are about your looks.'

'Yes, because we like things being in order.'

I looked at her and then at my watch wondering *coming on time* also falls under what she just said.

'Ok I am sorry, I came late.' she said keeping another novel on the table.

'This one is better than the last one.' she added as though she had made it a goal to turn me into a voracious reader. And all the novels were thrillers with murder stories. She likes suspense, she had said once. I looked at the novel, read it's heading and held it at the corners and saw how thick it was.

'Do you know how many years it will take for me to finish?'

'Don't tell me, you haven't finished the last one I gave.'

'Of course not. I need time.'

She paused and looked at me probably waiting to repeat the same words '*I finished it in two days*' which she had said while giving me the previous

novel.
‘Oh I forgot, you are too busy with Mili didi’s marriage. You told me.’ she said. She was right but not entirely. Even if I was free, I didn’t have the patience to keep my butt in one place and read it. The story started with a murder. It could have started with a romantic angle.
‘Yes, I barely get time to do anything.’ I said.
‘How are things at home?’ she asked.
‘Everything is fine. You have to come to meet my Mom,’
‘Now?’ she asked.
‘No, In Mili didi’s marriage.’
‘Are you crazy? I don’t even know anyone there.’
‘Don’t worry. Nidhi is coming too.’
‘And where is the invitation card?’
‘I will get one for you. The first print will be yours.’ I said.
‘It should be,’ she said.
‘So you said it is a love marriage right?’ she asked.
‘Love cum arranged marriage,’ I said.
‘Ya same.’
‘No. I had to do a lot of buttering to make this happen.’
‘This is the second time you are telling me. You want to take the entire credit of her marriage,’ she said
‘Exactly,’ I said. She smiled. People present there looked at us probably wondering we were the only nuts there.
‘What if your mom doesn’t like me?’ she asked.
‘That’s true.’
‘What?’
‘She would love you I mean.’
‘And how do you know?’
‘Have you seen yourself?’
‘Abhi?’ she said making her eyes bigger.
‘No one can say no to this girl in front of me.’ I said.
‘Really? Then I will come.’
‘What’s the name of your other two sisters but?’
‘Is that really important?’
‘Yes, it is. I have to know everyone’s name.’
‘But you won’t know their faces anyways until you meet.’
‘You show it to me later. Tell me their names first.’ she said.

‘Shruti and Anita Didi,’ I said.
‘Ok got it.’ She said.
‘But I am scared Abhi.’ she added
‘I am scared more than you.’
‘Then how are you going to handle it?’
‘Manish is there. Don’t worry.’ I said.
She looked at me with disgust.
‘Is there anything you do without him? For everything you need his help, is it?’
‘Yes, I do. You have a problem.’
‘Hopeless you are.’
‘Thanks.’
‘Don’t mess it up please?’ she said.
‘Don’t worry. I won’t.’
‘Be on time but.’ I added
‘You think I will be late?’ she asked.
‘I know you will be late.’
‘Shut up.’
‘Ok listen, please look beautiful that day.’
‘What do you mean?’ she said her eyes popped out.
‘No, I mean you are already, no doubt. But try to look traditional too.’ I said
‘And what am I going to wear?’
‘What do you want to wear?’ I said.
‘Saree.’ she said immediately.
‘When did you start wearing Saree?’
‘I will try. I have never worn a saree before but.’
‘What? But you should know to handle a saree by now.’
‘Why because I am a girl?’
‘No, because you are going to meet my mom.’
‘How is your Mom by the way?’ she asked.
‘Don’t worry. She is cool.’
‘I am still thinking what if she doesn’t like me?’
‘She would love you.’
‘Hope so.’
‘How is your dad?’ I asked.
‘He is strict. Why what happened?’ she asked
‘Nothing.’

‘Scared?’ she asked.
‘No ways.’
‘Hahahhahahah.’ she laughed. She was finding it funny.
‘Don’t worry he is not that strict.’
‘Did I say that I am scared?’ I asked.
‘But still.’ she said.
‘Keep your *still* with yourself. I met him at your home.’
‘You barely spoke to him but.’
‘Because I was busy looking at you.’
‘Is he Hitler?’ I asked. I was still so scared.
‘How dare you?’
‘No, I am just being sure.’
‘Just now you said you are not scared.’
‘Yes that’s the truth but still.’
‘Keep your *still* with yourself.’ she said.
‘Accept it!’ she added.
‘What?’
‘That you are,’ she said when I interrupted.
‘Scared? No ways.’
‘How about your sisters?’ she asked.
‘Just beware of Mili didi.’
‘Any specific reason?’
‘Many. Can’t tell you now.’
‘Ok Listen, my Mom was asking me to come to Dhanbad. Praveen’s birthday is there.’
‘Now don’t tell me you won’t be coming to the marriage.’
‘I mean, I would make you both speak to each other again. Speak to her properly this time.’
‘What will I talk to your mom? I get nervous.’
‘I am coming to meet your mom. So you are talking to my mom’
‘Let me think.’
‘Abhi,’ she said firmly.
‘How stubborn you are?’ I asked.
‘More than you can even think of.’
‘You never spoke to me like this.’ I said.
‘Because we never met like this before.’
‘I have to know a lot about you still.’

‘You know, I even wanted to celebrate your birthday.’ she added. I smiled.
‘What happened now ? Did I say anything wrong?’
‘Ask Manish. You will get to know. I would say, better ask Nidhi.’
‘What happened? Why can’t you tell me?’
‘My birthday was gone when you were planning. They just lied to you.’
‘Don’t tell me. They are so bad.’
‘If you knew about all this, why didn’t you tell me the truth?’
‘The next day you gave me a good session for the letter, if I remember correctly.’
‘My bad. I am sorry.’ she said when I saw Nidhi and Manish coming.
‘How come they are here?’ I asked when Aparna turned around and looked at them.
‘You wanted to meet them right? So I called them too.’
‘I didn’t mean it but.’ I said. Nidhi and Manish sat beside us.
‘Can I tell you something?’ Nidhi asked.
‘Yes tell me.’
‘She was missing you badly after she left for Dhanbad.’ Nidhi said. Aparna nudged her badly.
‘And she even asked if we can go to a temple on your birthday.’ Nidhi added, still in pain.
‘Hahahahaahaha.’ I laughed.
‘Just now I told that you guys lied to her.’ I said.
‘Why did you do that? You could have let it be, right?’ Manish said.
‘Shut up will you.’ I said.
‘Hadn’t you told her, she would have kept calling me to make more plans.’ Nidhi said.
‘Stop it Nidhi.’ Aparna said. She couldn’t even make an eye contact with me.
‘I am an idiot that I tell you everything.’ Aparna added.
‘That you are.’ Manish said.
‘Can we have something?’ Nidhi asked pointing at the menu.
We finally placed an order for four people. Aparna ordered a paneer masala dosa and rosogulla. Nidhi and Manish ordered tandoori chicken and daal makhni along with Tandoori roti. I ordered a coke.
‘How is the preparation going?’ Manish asked.
‘Oh please don’t ask me. I am done. I hardly have any time these days.’
‘What are you talking about?’ he asked.

‘IIT right?’
‘Mili didi’s marriage idiot.’
‘I told you to come yesterday and you didn’t come.’ I said.
‘I was busy with Nidhi.’
‘I need you to come tomorrow. A lot of guests are coming.’
‘I will be free too.’ Aparna said.
‘Girls are not needed.’ I said.
‘Oh please. Then what is the use of Manish?’ Nidhi said. We all laughed. Manish didn’t.
‘I have changed now.’ he said.
‘Then who was looking at Ridhi today?’ Nidhi asked.
‘Our eyes met by sheer coincidence.’ he said. We all laughed.
‘Holy shit, my uncle is here,’ Aparna said.
We all looked down to hide our faces but it was an open café. There was too much space to be not seen. I was just wondering what all could happen here if her uncle sees her with us. Nidhi nudged at Aparna. They both got up and moved towards the women’s washroom. Manish and I took a sigh of relief. Aparna’s uncle stood at the counter for some time and then came towards us. He sat on the table right beside me. I looked at him closely. He had long hair and a big moustache.
‘Did he see us with her?’ I mumbled.
‘We both would have been dead if that was so,’ Manish said.
‘What is he doing in this café ?’
‘He might have come to meet his girlfriend too like us.’
‘Oh shut up Manish, don’t joke.’ I said. For the next few minutes, her uncle kept sitting there, reading a magazine. The guy at the reception called him. He took an order and left. Manish called Nidhi.
‘I was dead if he would have seen me with you guys.’ Aparna said as she sat beside me.
‘Don’t worry, Nidhi was there with you. We could have handled.’ I said trying to sound smart.
‘A few seconds back when her uncle was here, your mind was not even working.’ Manish interrupted.
‘Have you seen him, how scary he is?’ I said. Everyone laughed.
‘Ok leave all this. He is gone anyways.’ he said.
‘We need to stop meeting like this.’ I said.
‘Thank god we have phones. Life is so easy now.’ Nidhi said. Aparna

looked at me.
‘Why don’t you get one too?’ Manish said looking at Aparna
‘Who will call me?’ she said.
‘I will.’ Manish said. We all laughed.
‘You will call every girl if I am not wrong.’ Aparna said.
‘Manish you need to change. Look what Aparna told. You have a girlfriend now.’ Nidhi said.
‘I am trying.’ he said.
‘I know it’s not easy for you but you can.’ Nidhi said.
‘Nidhi.’ Manish grunted.
‘Ok guys, don’t start fighting now.’ I said.
‘What time I am supposed to be there at your place tomorrow?’
‘Be there by 10:30 a.m.’
‘I will be there by 11. Need to drop mom to her college.’
‘Aunty also goes to college?’ Aparna asked.
‘It was a really bad joke Aparna.’ Manish said.
‘Thanks.’ she said and made a face. We all laughed.
‘How bad you all are.’ she said. My phone buzzed.
‘Where are you? You told you will be here, after an hour.’ Mom said.
‘Yes, Mom. I will come in some time.’ I said.
Everyone looked at me and then at their plates.
‘Is Manish there?’ she asked. I looked at him. He was busy taking that last bite of his tandoori chicken.
‘Yes, Mom. He is here. Shall I give him the phone?’
‘No. Just tell him he needs to be here tomorrow too.’ she said.
‘Yes Mom, I have told already.’ I said.
‘Ok leave soon.’ she said and disconnected the call. I looked at everyone’s plate. They were done already.
‘Need to leave. Mom wants me there. You guys carry on.’
‘No wait. I will come with you.’ Aparna said.
‘We will leave too.’ Nidhi said.
Manish and Nidhi left together. I dropped Aparna back to her PG and left for my home immediately.

Chapter 6

Mili Didi’s marriage was fixed on 3rdNov. Aparna was coming to meet my family. I had managed to get a silk saree for her. I didn’t want to take any

chance with Mom. She had a weakness for three things. *One,* if the girl is beautiful; *Two,* if the girl is in saree; and *Three,* if the girl carries a bindi on her forehead. If I could find a girl like that, she would never say no to her.

We had booked few cabs for the regular pickups and drops. The kids from the family were dropped first. After that, we started with the drops for elderly people. There was an elder person in each cab to look after the kids. Gandhi bhaiya, my elder brother was busy with the arrangements at Pandaal. The entire venue was lighted up like a mansion and the arrangement looked extravagant. The catering guys had already arrived on time and so were the music bands. There were some last-minute wiring issues that had come up at the entrance and an electrician was looking into it. We had managed to have a darbaari too at the entrance. Mom wanted to have some drama.

The elders from the family were escorting guests to the pandaal. I felt like an idiot standing with them. For every small thing, they were laughing out loud. The marriage was supposed to start in an hour. I was checking my watch every second but either it was too slow or I was missing Aparna too much. She had promised that she will be on time but I knew how girls' promises are. When they say five minutes it means fifteen and when they say *Don't worry I will be on time,* it means for sure they won't be on time. It was 7 p.m. She hadn't yet reached. I had already made enough excuses to stay outside but Mom called me once again and I had to go inside to help her with few things. There was a ritual where brothers should be a part of and I could not stay outside to receive her. I did manage to ask Shruti didi to be there at the entrance to receive her but I had no idea how long she will have to wait. I had given her only one way to recognize her which was '*she wouldn't be able to take her eyes off her face*'.

Shruti didi did give me that '*Let me also see'* expression for which I just smiled and came inside. Every sister is jealous when her brother finds a beautiful girl for himself. They just don't show it. In the next twenty minutes, the pandit was done with his boring mantras and some thread tying formalities when I saw Shruti didi coming inside. She was with Aparna. All my relatives head turned towards her as she entered the pandal including my Mom. Maybe she liked her too but she still did not know who she was. Aparna looked no less than the bride herself. I don't know how she managed to look so traditional and still so simple which could have made anyone fall for her. No jewellery, no extra makeup and still she looked like

the best one could have ever imagined. She kept her hair opened. I was happy that she came late or else I wouldn't have been able to give her this grand a welcome.

For a few seconds, none of my relatives took their eyes off her including me. No one looked interested in the marriage anymore, especially the elderly men from our family. I guess they had forgotten that they were too old to fall for a girl now. Shruti didi made her sit close to Mom. There were ladies more than expected. I almost had to look like a gate crasher if I had to go there and say even a *Hi* to her, to tell her that yes you have stolen my heart one more time and yes you have broken your promise to come on time but I was happy that you did so.

I stood close to Mili didi from where I could see Aparna and even she could see me. She was making her eyes bigger and looking at me as if she was angry that I was not sitting close to her. She had no idea that even I was dying to sit beside her but then I looked at Mom. I had to control my emotions.

'Can't we marry right now?' I asked the inner me looking at the mandap which was booked for my sister.

'Ask your mom.' it said.

I just wanted to end that big question of my life. Our marriage. Who made these rules to have a career and then get married? I could barely take my eyes off her. She carried a bindi on her forehead. It was a complimentary gift along with the saree. It looked perfect on her face. Nidhi wore a lehenga too. I could see why Manish was talking less today. Girls in traditional dresses can make you fall on your knees, especially if you have never seen them in those and suddenly they turn out to be a stunner when they wear it.

I saw Shruti didi talking to mom. Maybe she was going to tell her about the girl, people were not able to take their eyes from. I saw Mom bending a little forward and looking at Aparna. I closed my eyes instantly. I don't know why. When I opened them, I saw smiles on both faces. Aparna touched Mom's feet the moment she saw her. Mom held her shoulders as she bowed and asked her to sit right beside her. Suddenly at that moment, my life looked so complete. It felt as if everything was in place now. The girl whom I loved so much has even won my Mom's heart in just one meeting. Mili didi was right behind me still looking so single. She wasn't minding her business since Aparna had arrived.

‘Who is she?’ she asked.
‘Your Mehendi didn’t dry well. It looks yellow. This should be orange right.’ I said. She was no less than Shruti didi. You give her a word and she could write a book on that. So I preferred to keep shut until the marriage gets over.
‘Yes. I had to wash it off early. Had a lot of work,’ she said. I glared at her. I was the one who did all her work.
‘But who is she?’ Mili didi asked again.
‘Where is Dad?’ I asked dodging her question again.
‘Abhi.’ she grunted as she realized I was trying to be smart.
‘Who is who?’ I asked. Mili didi had been keeping an eye not only on me but even my phone calls, my messages. Every move I make she has to know or else her life will be so boring.
‘That girl who is sitting with Nidhi.’
‘You know Nidhi?’ I asked. I never told her about Nidhi before.
‘What is it that you don’t know?’ I asked further.
‘Right now my focus is on that girl beside Nidhi,’ she said giving that cunning smile. I hated it.
‘Is she from the girl’s side or the boy’s side?’ she asked.
‘But who told you about Nidhi?’ I asked.
‘Mom.’
‘What? Are you serious?’ I asked, my eyes popped out. I thought Manish told her. Now I knew, I have to be really careful while even talking on the phone.
‘She was with Manish one evening when he came to meet you. Mom saw her and then she made me see too. This girl was with him waiting outside,’ she added.
‘So, is this what you do all the time, peeping into other’s business?’ I wanted to ask but I didn’t.
‘Are you sure?’
‘Very sure.’
‘Today she came with Manish again and that’s how I guessed she must be Nidhi. She entered inside the marriage hall with him.’ she added. Her guesses were better than my plan.
‘Ok leave, who is she?’ she asked again
‘Aparna.’ I said. I saw a smile on Mili didi’s face the moment she heard that name.

‘Are you serious Abhi? Is she the girl you were talking about that night?’ she asked.
‘How come you managed to get this girl?’ she asked further.
‘What do you mean?’ I asked. Sisters just don’t know what to talk and what not to talk.
‘Look at you.’ she said. I ignored. It was better to look at a beautiful girl than to clarify yourself to your sister.
‘Can you talk to her?’ I asked.
‘Why don’t you go?’
‘She will feel better if you go. She doesn’t know any of you guys.’ I said.
Mili didi left. The first set of rituals was done for her and the next one was about to start. Indian marriages are full of rituals, which I wonder how people even remember. Mili didi reached closer. I saw a smile on Aparna’s face as she met her. They both smiled and shook hands.

Aparna was way traditional than one can even imagine. In her family, they would touch everyone’s feet if they meet someone elder to them. I mean literally everyone’s feet. We both looked at each other. She looked happy. She felt involved with my second family member. I mean my third family member. I was the first she was already involved with. I had already made some extra space for Nidhi and Aparna where no guys from the boy’s side were to be seen. I had extra instructions to be good with the boy’s side no matter what they do. Why does the boy’s side have so much freedom in a marriage? What if they look at my girl? I shall not react also. Well, I kept that question aside and focussed on the girl who was craving for my attention.
‘Do you need any help?’ Manish asked.
‘No thanks.’ I said.
‘Just because of your girl, I asked Nidhi also to come in traditional dress. They look more beautiful in these,’ he said.
‘Exactly.’ I said.

My dad was busy with relatives from the boy’s side. He wore a cream shirt with a dark brown blazer and a turban on his head to attend the guests. He was searching for something. I guess he was looking for me who was supposed to be there with him. Without wasting a second, I ran immediately to be by his side. Manish was called by his Mom.
‘Where have you been?’ Dad asked. He was a little annoyed.

‘Take this,’ he said and gave me a plate full of flowers. I had to shower them on the boy’s side only. Now, how the hell do I know if the person coming inside was from the boy’s side or not? I did not know all my relatives. Gandhi bhaiya had left to arrange for the extra catering. There was a shortage. We got to know at the last moment that there were some extra guests coming who had refused to come earlier due to time constraints.

It took me half an hour to settle things down. I was drenched in sweat like hell. I had to take a bath and wear a Sherwaani which Aparna had asked me to. I came inside the changing room and checked myself in the mirror. I looked really tired. I took the sherwaani and went inside to take a bath. I could say, it was the best shower I had had with that mix of hot and cold water. The hotel staff had managed everything nicely. I came out of the bathroom just wearing a towel. I forgot that it was not my home and I left my sherwaani in the bathroom itself. There were people apart from my family members who saw me in that half-naked condition and moreover Aparna was there too. Her eyes popped out as she saw me. Oh no. She laughed. I cursed her for that and turned around to re-enter the bathroom. But before I could do so someone else entered. Aparna’s face had turned red in a matter of seconds. She could barely control her smile. It was fun for her when I was struggling to find another spare bathroom. Damn it. All of them were occupied.

I had never looked so helpless before. I saw one bathroom getting vacated. I entered immediately but then there was a problem. My Sherwaani was in the bathroom right next to this one. Damn it. I will again have to come out now. What the hell is wrong with me? I waited for another five minutes inside when finally I heard someone coming out from the bathroom next to mine. I looked at the guy. He was probably a guest from the marriage. I cursed him and then looked at Aparna. She was still enjoying it. I cursed her too and went inside.

After a few minutes, I finally came out in my sherwaani when I saw Mom’s sisters and few ladies from the neighbourhood sitting around Aparna. Neeti buaa, Sushma Aunty, Anjani mausi mom’s second sister, Jyoti maami were busy talking to her. I had no doubt, Mom would have told the ladies about Aparna and then the rest of the ladies would have joined the leading lady, I mean my mom.

‘She is so beautiful.’ Jyoti Maami said looking at Aparna.

‘And traditional too.’ Anjani Mausi added.
‘Oh yes, she is. Everyone is asking about her.’ Neeti bua said.
‘We hardly see girls taking care of themselves as her.’ Mom said.
‘So you are from the boy’s side or the girl’s side?’ Jyoti maami asked.
Aparna looked at Nidhi and then at Shruti didi.
‘She is Abhishek’s friend.’ Shruti didi said.
‘Then she must be from the girl’s side.’ Anjani mausi said. Everyone there laughed looking at Aparna. She was not even speaking a word looking here and there, probably everywhere searching for me so that she could scold me for getting her into such a situation.
‘If you want, we can get you married to a nice guy too.’ another lady said whom I couldn’t recognize. I cursed her. Aparna was getting restless sitting there when I realized I had to do something to get her out. I was more than sure she must be cursing me for leaving her alone. There was a smile on her face which I knew was fake and I knew if I go there, the ladies might create a big scene for sure. I saw Manish coming towards me.
‘Save her now,’ he said looking at Aparna.
‘You heard what they are talking?’ I asked. He nodded.
‘Where were you?’ I said.
‘Seeing your aunties and their faces I had to run from there. Bro they are boring, all of them.’
‘I know.’ I said.
‘What’s the plan now?’
‘Tell my mom that dad is calling and the ladies will follow.’
‘Will it work?’
‘Can you do that?’ I said. Manish nodded and left.
Jyoti maami, Sushma bua, Anjani bua followed my Mom as she left along with the rest of the ladies. They all pinched my cheek as if I was a kid and not a grown-up guy anymore. I only liked it when Jyoti Maami did it. Mom stopped and pulled my ears in front of everyone. Aparna saw that from the distance and smiled.
‘Mom please.’ I said.
‘Where is your Dad?’ she asked. She could have asked that without pulling my ears.
‘Right there.’ I said pointing towards my dad.
‘Mili didi needs you too. Her bangles are missing.’ I added.
‘Take care of her.’ Mom said looking at Aparna.

‘You liked her?’ I asked. She smiled but didn’t say anything. I knew it, she would love her.
‘Miss Aparna, you are in the right place. Thanks, Mili Didi for getting married.’ I told myself.
Nidhi left with Manish to meet his mom who was sitting close to the Pandit. I ran immediately and sat beside Aparna.
‘Where were you?’ she asked, her eyes bigger.
‘Sorry, I was caught up with this guest thing.’
‘Liked My Mom?’ I asked
‘Loved her,’
‘Her voice is even sweeter than mine.’ she added.
‘Yes I know that but you are sweeter than her.’
‘Very funny.’
‘True but.’
‘But your aunties are just impossible. They were all pulling my leg. Nidhi was about to leave when I begged her not to. Is this how you leave a girl amongst strangers? I hate you.’ she said. I loved the way she said it. I think I liked listening to that more than *I love you* from her.
‘I love that bindi on your forehead. They suit you.’
‘Thanks.’
‘After all, I gave it to you.’
‘It was complimentary.’ she said. I laughed but at a low pitch. She was not even letting me take credit for anything.
‘And the saree that you are wearing, it’s my choice.’
‘But it took a lot of time for me to get dressed. It’s not easy to wear a saree,’ she said.
‘It’s even more difficult to impress your future mother in law.’
‘I love it but.’ she said.
‘Say thanks then.’
‘Get lost.’
‘That’s unfair.’
‘I am the one who gave you the colour choice.’ she said.
I realized that no one can beat a girl when it comes to proving a point.
‘Shall I tell you one thing?’ I asked.
‘Hmmm tell.’
‘I love your dimples.’ I said.
‘They will be mine in a few years.’ I added.

‘In your dreams.’ she said. I looked away. She giggled
‘Now what?’ I asked.
‘I love teasing you Abhi.’
‘Shall I also tell you one thing?’ she asked
‘What?’ I said still upset.
‘I love your dimples too.’
‘Really?’ I asked, my eyes wider.
‘Yes. That was the first thing I noticed when I met you.’ she said. I flaunted my dimples once again for her. She was about to pull my cheeks when I made my eyes bigger.
‘There are people here.’ I said.
‘So what?’ she said as if she didn’t care.
‘They will think we are having an affair.’ I said.
‘Aren’t we?’ she said and giggled. I don’t know what had happened to that reserved girl I was in love with. She was missing.
‘The marriage is so boring Abhi.’
‘It’s a love marriage,’ I said, reminding her once she said love marriages are not boring.
‘So what? I said that three months back. Can we go out please?’
‘Do you really want people to think we are having an affair Aparna?’
‘I thought we were in love.’ she said.
‘Yes, and my sister is getting married.’
‘Ok baba, as you say but after that varmaala thing we will go for a walk.’
‘And what about guests?’ I said.
‘That Gandhi bhaiya will take care.’ she said.
‘Why can’t you sit and enjoy the marriage?’
‘It’s not my marriage.’
‘So mean you are.’
‘You are no less.’ she said.
For some more time, we sat with each other and discussed how we will get married. Is it going to be a grand one or a simple one or will it be a court marriage? We decided sitting there that we will marry in a temple and not in a grand venue. We did not have any other option. The marriage was really boring.
‘How is your Mom now?’ I asked. She was not well.
‘She is fine now. I gave her my kisses.’ she said. I laughed.
‘And me?’

‘You will not get anything. You are not my mom.’
‘Oh is it?’
‘Yes,’ she said.
‘And Uncle, how is he?’
‘He is fine too.’
‘Did you tell him about me?’
‘Have you gone crazy?’ she said
‘Great. I let you meet my mom and you are not doing anything at all.’ I said.
‘My family is not like yours.’
‘Who you mean?’ I asked her to be specific
‘My dad, I mean. Mom likes you but.’ she said. I smiled.
‘When you left, she said Abhishek is good but still, I don’t know what that meant. You know how moms are.’ she added further.
‘She is exactly like you.’
She made her eyes bigger and smiled. Thank god no one was noticing us. After an hour, Mili didi was finally done taking seven vows of marriage when I asked Aparna to join me with the flower showering. We came to the front, close to my dad. After the flower showering ceremony, she met him.
‘Dad she is,’ I said when Dad interrupted
‘Aparna right? Your mom told me,’ he said. Aparna bowed down and touched my dad’s feet.
‘Be happy.’ Dad said looking at her. I looked at mom. She gave me a smile.
‘Did you ask her for the dinner?’ he asked. A few people from the boy’s side had already started enjoying the food.
‘We will have now.’ I said.
‘Ok. I will go and be with Mili. You take care of Aparna and drop her back yourself.’ he said.
‘Sure,’ I said.
‘Don’t stay too late here.’ he said looking at Aparna.
‘Liked him?’ I asked
‘I love all your family members. They are so nice,’ she said.
‘Not more than me,’ I said.
‘Shut up,’ she said. After dinner, we went for a walk in the garden area. The lighting made our walk a little more soothing.
‘I love your outfit,’ she said.
‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘I have always wanted to see you like this.’
‘Really?’ I asked.
‘Yes and better dress like this after marriage every day.’
‘Sorry, it is not possible. I am already dying of the heat and sweat wearing this.’
‘I don’t know. You have to manage.’ she said.
‘Then you should always dress up in a saree every single day after our marriage.’
‘Do you even know how heavy a silk saree is?’ she said
‘Promise me that you would always get dressed beautifully every morning before I leave for work.’
‘How are we both fantasizing things we don’t even know would ever happen.’ she giggled.
‘Promise me.’ I continued ignoring what she just said.
‘I promise but then you will have to take care of the cooking department. I hate cooking.’ she said.
‘Oh no, that’s a big problem then.’ I said.
‘Why, what happened?’ she asked.
‘I am a girl. So, I should know about cooking. Is it?’ she added.
‘No, I mean I know really good cooking.’
‘That’s great right.’ she said.
‘That’s the problem. You will make me do it the whole day.’
‘Well as I said, that will be your department.’ she said.
‘But when the guests come, you will have to take care of the kitchen.’ I said.
‘They will make fun of me, you see.’ I added.
‘Ok, I will do that but only at a condition.’
‘And what’s that?’
‘You need to tell them, how delicious food I cook all the time.’ she said.
‘Oh no, I can’t lie to them.’
‘Then forget it.’ she said.
‘Ok fine. I will do that.’ I said.
I checked my watch. It was too late when I arranged a cab to drop her back. I couldn’t go with her as Mom was looking for me. I asked Manish to accompany her as Nidhi was staying back with Mili didi.
‘Thanks for the Saree and even the bindi,’ she said as she left.

You never know girls. They just know how to win your heart at the right moment.

Chapter 7

Girls argue for no reason. I read it somewhere and laughed thinking whoever wrote it was a fool. But after spending time with Aparna, I realized I was the fool. She argues on every small thing but that is not a problem. The issue is, I lose the arguments just like every other guy does. Manish told me once that when a boy and a girl reach a point where the argument refuses to die until one surrender the boy is always on the losing side. We end up accepting what they want us to.
'Abhi I have to say something,' she said in her sweet voice standing in the phone booth. I wanted to end up the conversation on a sweet note tonight. She was leaving for Delhi the next day and she had asked me not to come to the station. Her dad would be there. I could hear numerous honks and dogs barking from the other side. On my side, there was peace.
'Tell me.' I said.
'I need to ask you something.'
'Yes go ahead, I am listening.' I said.
'I would have been happy if you had come to meet me tomorrow.' she said.
'If your dad wasn't there, I would have met you. And you only asked me not to come. Didn't you?'
'I know that. You don't have to repeat it.'

‘Moreover, your dad is too serious. I can’t even talk to you in front of him,’
‘It’s ok. I don’t want to spoil your mood again.’
‘What happened? Tell me.’ I said. She waited for few seconds.
‘That you can’t face my Dad,’ she said.
‘Oh really?’ I asked. Girls just can’t let you live in peace.
‘Look, I just felt that you will get into trouble.’ I added
‘No problem. I knew that you were still not ready to face him. So I asked you not to.’
‘Oh please. If my dad was there, even you wouldn’t have come.’
‘Abhi I am a girl. I can’t do that. We are not supposed to.’
‘And who said that?’ I asked.
‘No one. But that’s how we girls are you know. We are shy.’
‘Oh yes, and we are shameless right?’
‘Not like that but still,’ she said making me angry.
‘What is wrong with you? Do I look like an idiot to you that I am not coming to meet you?’
‘Abhi, that’s not the point. You are an idiot no doubt but there are things which only guys should do.’
I heard the sound of another coin going in that phone booth.
‘Yes and girls should do only what they feel comfortable about, right? Look, I can come to meet your dad. I just felt that you might get into trouble.’ I said.
‘Abhi, I know you are scared. It’s fine,’ she said. I couldn’t control myself.
‘What time is your train leaving tomorrow?’
‘What happened? Why are you asking that?’
‘Just tell me.’ I said.
‘Sharp 9:30 a.m,’
‘Ok fine.’
‘What fine Abhi? What are you thinking?’
‘You will get to know tomorrow.’
‘Abhi, dad would be there. Please don’t do anything.’
‘Please have a strong heart. Tomorrow I am coming.’
‘Coming where? Abhi, what the hell are you planning to do? I am scared now.’
‘No. You said I am scared. Isn’t it? Wait for tomorrow.’
‘Abhi, I was joking.’
‘For the last three weeks, you are saying the same thing and I have been

listening patiently but now the time has come. Even your dad is here.'
'Abhi, please. I am begging you. I just love teasing you. I won't bring this topic again. Please,'
'Goodnight Aparna. You asked for it.'
'I am sorry. Are you going to kill me for this?' she pleaded.
'Look I am coming. Goodnight,' I said
'Abhi please,' she said. She was literally into tears. I disconnected the call.

The next morning, I reached the station but suddenly a fear grabbed me deep within.

Why every girl's dad has to be so scary? Why can't they be nice like our dad?

I looked around to check if he was on the platform. He wasn't. I ran up to the compartment and checked the names of the passengers. I forgot to ask her seat details. She wouldn't have told me anyway even if I had asked for it. *Aparna – S4(Berth No:1),* the sheet had her name at the top. It means she was sitting close to the entrance. I had to make an entry from the entrance of the next compartment S5.

'I don't think you should do it.' a voice within me said as I entered S5.
'Don't get scared. You can do it.' another voice in me said.
'Stop scaring me,' I said to both the voices in my head.

I still had no idea how I was going to face her dad but I had to. I saw her dad standing close to her seat as I entered. My heart stopped beating completely.

'*Why your luggage is kept here, Why can't you keep it with yourself. Can't you see this is our berth*' the few nice words that I could hear him saying from that far a distance.

'Abhi run!' the inner me said.
'No, I can't do this,' I told to myself.

I looked at her dad once again. He still looked so scary. I was barely breathing. I took a deep breath, actually the deepest I could have taken and walked forward. I had to do this.

'Wait,' the inner me said.
'What if he asks what are you doing here?' it said.
'Point,'
'I would say that I have come to drop my friend and I had no idea Aparna was also travelling,'
'Do you need to say the last part? Will it not look like you are trying to

clarify?'
'Whatever but I will keep that as a back-up in case,'
'Ok fine,' the inner me said.
'Wait, man,' the inner me said again.
'Now what?'
'You should look at Aparna with surprise and shock. OK,' the inner me said.
'Yes exactly. As if I have not seen her for ages,'
'Let's go then,' the inner me said.
I counted every step I took towards him. One step I took, one heartbeat I lost. And finally, I came close to her dad. Now he was right in front of me but not facing me at all.
'Come on uncle turn around so that I can give you that shock and surprise look.' I told to myself. I recalled that dialogue from DDLJ where Shahrukh tells *palat* to Kajol and she turns. Uncle turned around the next second.
'Run Abhi.' the inner me said. I controlled myself.
'When did you come here?' I asked instantly making my eyes as big as possible to make him believe that nothing on earth could have shocked me more than this.
'I came a day before but how come you are here?' he asked. He was in shock too. I so knew it, he would ask that question. For sure, he might have even started suspecting me that I have come to meet his daughter who was sitting right under my nose but not even looking at me.
'Anything urgent?' I asked as if I had no idea that he even has a daughter and I am madly in love with her. My heart was still beating so fast and she was ignoring me as if she still hadn't heard me. She looked cute in those specs. I felt like holding her cheeks and squeeze them. *Her dad would kill me if I do so.*
'I am going along with Aparna to Delhi,' he said.
'Oh, is it? She didn't tell me.' I said still pretending as if I hadn't seen his daughter.
She was sitting right in front of my eyes pretending as if she didn't even know me and here I have put my life, my self-respect, almost everything at stake for her. Uncle asked me to meet her. She looked at me this time with so much confusion and questions already running in her mind. It was like she wanted to jump off the train which was not moving and suicide.
'What happened?' uncle asked looking at her.

‘Nothing Dad,’ she said. I knew everything that was hidden in that nothing.
‘Hi, Aparna,’ I said smiling.
‘Hi *Abhi* a little pause and then *shek,*’ she said completing my name.
Oh lady you will put both of us in danger. Don’t call me Abhi.
‘Long time we didn’t see each other.’ I said.
‘You shouldn’t have said that,’ the inner me said.
‘Look, her dad would have loved to hear that.’
‘Ya, I was busy with a lot of things,’ she said.
‘I know what lot of things you were busy with until last night.’ I wanted to say but I didn’t.
‘Don’t take her name while talking. Just talk casually. The more you take her name, the more she will take your name and you might get caught.’ the inner me said.
‘So how are you?’ I said without taking her name.
‘I am fine *Abhi* a little pause and then *shek,*’ she said. My heart almost stopped beating.
‘Why this girl has to take my name every time?’
I gave her a cold eye.
‘You will get me into trouble.’ I mumbled and looked at uncle, who was standing at a distance.
‘How come you are here but?’ she asked.
Why she had to repeat her dad’s question which I ducked a few seconds back.
‘I came here to drop one of my friends,’ I replied.
‘Who?’ she asked with a big question mark on her face as if she had no idea why I was here.
‘Manish,’ I said without thinking twice.
‘But he has left for Pune last night,’ she said. I cursed her.
‘No I mean my other friend Manish,’ I said almost getting strokes already.
‘Oh ok.’ she said. Her ‘*Oh ok*’ would have cost an innocent guy’s life.
‘Now don’t you dare ask any dumb question.’ I mumbled.

But without wasting a single second I decided to turn towards her dad who felt safer to talk to. I was almost getting scary thoughts wondering what she might ask next and get me into trouble. I had no plans to stand in front of her and get myself screwed up. Her dad and I spoke for some time. She got busy with her boring books. Of course, she was pretending. I couldn't dare to look at her again and talk. I realized, that the girl I was in

love with was in no way safe for me when her dad is around. Moreover, she was dumb than I had thought.
‘Ok, uncle I am getting late. Need to leave.’ I said.
‘Bye Aparna,’ I said.
She smiled.
‘Bye Abhishek.’ she said.
Thank God, she didn’t call me Abhi. I left. She would have got me killed. I kept laughing the entire day recalling the madness I had been a part of and the dumbness she was showing.

Chapter 8

Two months later, the results were out. I was leaving for Nagpur. Aparna was leaving for Coimbatore. I could not even meet her before she left. She had to board the train for Tamil Nadu from Dhanbad. She had been crying almost every day since she found out that we won’t meet for the next four years. I had broken into tears too but I didn’t let her know that. I had promised that I will be giving calls to her twice a month but she kept saying *What if it doesn’t work, What if you forget me, What if you leave me and find someone else?* I knew why she was thinking that and to what extent she was scared to lose me just like I was to go far from her.

How will I stay without her for these many years? How will I spend a single day without seeing her face? How will I see her dimple which was my only way to happiness? And who will laugh at my lame jokes?

Before leaving, we tried to meet but nothing worked but at last, we planned something. We both were travelling on the same day. I had somehow found a common point where our trains would cross at a difference of ten minutes. The good part being I had a halt of fifteen minutes at that station. So I still had five minutes to meet her. She didn’t have a phone, so I had no way to contact her. As planned, my train reached the station on time. Her train was running late by an hour. She called me from one of her co-passenger’s phone exactly at the time we were supposed to meet. We couldn’t meet but that call from her at that time, felt like we met each other. I could visualize that happiness she might be feeling to somehow make me feel a little better, even if our plan failed. She said sorry as if the train was delayed due to her. She used every single second on the call as if she would never get to talk to me. I couldn’t even speak a word. She kept talking. I kept listening. I was really dying to hear her voice more

than anything at that moment.
‘We will meet again, right Abhi?’ she asked before the call got disconnected. I could not even tell her that *Yes we will meet and we will talk even more so that you never feel that I am away from you even for a second*. She was into tears when she said those last words. I tried for the rest of the journey to connect to that number but I couldn’t. I reached my hostel in the evening the next day. My train was delayed. It took me around two hours to be done with all the formalities when I pulled her pic out of my wallet and started speaking to it. I didn’t even realize that it was just a pic. I was asking her a few things and I was even answering on her behalf as if that pic was talking to me. She might still be on the train thinking about me. I did not even have my dinner and slept talking to her, I mean to her pic. The next day I was waiting for her call but she didn’t call me. Maybe she was busy. It was two days already and she still hadn’t called me. She had said that she would, once she reaches Coimbatore. I had no way to contact her. I couldn’t even call at her home and check if she had reached when my phone rang. It was her.
‘What my baby is doing?’ she asked.
‘Your baby is missing his baby,’ I said.
‘Oh Is it? I thought you forgot me.’
‘Shut up.’ I said.
‘Miss me?’
‘Missing you.’ I said.
‘What my shona is doing?’ I asked.
‘Standing in the booth like always and people glaring at me like always,’ she said.
I laughed.
‘That’s my girl. I give you so much pain right. You have to wait so long to talk to me.’
‘Keep quiet. I love waiting for you. It’s the only thing I like when I have to wait for hours to just listen to your voice.’
‘Did you find a nice roommate?’ I asked.
‘Yes, I found one. She is from Bangalore. I am done with all my formalities and made few friends as well. South India is completely different Abhi.’ she said.
‘This place is no less different,’ I said.
‘Are you done with all the arrangements?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I am. Just had to make some extra payment for the canteen.’ I said.
‘Did you tell your dad?’ she asked.
‘No, Mom told there is some financial issue at home. So I haven’t informed him yet.’ I said.
‘Do you even have any money left with you?’ she asked.
‘Yes, I have. Don’t worry.’ I said.
‘Ok, so you have started lying to me also. Great Abhi,’. I had no idea how she knew that when I had to tell her the whole story.
‘Now how will you spend the rest of your month? You hardly have any money left,’ she asked.
‘Don’t worry I will manage,’ I said.
‘Keep quiet. I am sending money tomorrow. You use that and don’t you dare give any excuse now. I know you will skip your breakfast and dinner to manage. I know your management very well.’ she said.
I had to accept her words or else she wouldn’t have slept peacefully the whole night.
‘Tell me about Coimbatore,’ I said.
‘It is cold here right now.’
‘Nagpur is hot.’
‘How about the girls?’ she asked.
‘Now don’t start. I have just reached here,’
‘Look I have no issue if you talk to them but please remember you have someone.’
‘You are my best friend. You know that and it is not easy to find one.’ I said.
She couldn’t talk any further, due to people waiting on the other side. We bid goodbye on a sweet note and a flying kiss from her, which travelled all the way to Nagpur in hardly a second.

Chapter 9

It was my birthday. Aparna was coming to Nagpur. She had planned everything already. I didn't want her to come as she had to travel alone but she insisted she wanted to see me. Her tickets were confirmed from Coimbatore to Nagpur but the entire plan had to be cancelled at the last moment. I had to leave for my home as Mom was not well. She had been admitted to the hospital owing to her bad health for quite a long time. When I reached home, she was already discharged from the hospital after a few tests. The doctor had asked to keep her under complete bed rest for a few weeks. I didn't want to leave Mom as she was still recovering. I extended my plans to stay at home for a few more days. Aparna was angry but she didn't say anything.

The next day, I was in the study room. Mom was in the bedroom along with Shruti didi. I wanted to call Aparna but I didn't. I was scared if she was still angry. I was supposed to be in Nagpur with her. It would have been nice if we had met. I checked my phone. There was a message from her *'Can I call you?'* it read. I checked the time. It was an hour before. Shit. I had told her to message me rather than giving me a call.

I called her immediately.

'Sorry, I didn't see your message.'

'No problem. Are you free for some time?' she asked.

'Yes tell me.' I said.

'Do you have a laptop with a webcam?'

'Need to check. By the way, what is a webcam?' I asked.

'We can see each other through a webcam Abhi.'

I didn't understand how people would see each other through a webcam. I had never used it before.

'Let me check with Shruti di but what if she doesn't have it?'

'If she doesn't have, then please arrange one. I need to see you on your birthday at least.'

' I am sorry for the mess.'

'Did I say anything?'

'No but still you know.'

'Keep *your still* with you and get a laptop.' she said.

'And what about you? How will you arrange one?' I asked.

'Abhi, if I hadn't already arranged I wouldn't have asked you, ok.' she said irritated.

'Hmmm, I got it.'

‘You have become really dumb, I must say.’ she said.
‘Aparna.’ I grunted.
‘Oh please, you must accept it. It’s high time.’ she said.
‘Ok, I accept it. I am sorry.’
‘You should be.’
‘Do you really want me to feel embarrassed now?’
‘Yes, I want to because you deserve it.’
‘Do I have permission to keep the phone now as I have some work you have asked me to do?’
‘Oh yes. Go ahead.’ she said and disconnected the call. I checked with Shruti didi. It was there. I immediately called Aparna.
‘Guess what?’ I said.
‘Don’t tell me that we will be finally seeing each other.’
‘Yes, we will be and I am not going to mess it this time.’
‘Don’t say that.’
‘But why?’
‘Because every time you say so, things just get messed up.’
‘It’s not like that. I wanted to tell you, why I had to come here.’
‘It’s ok. I don’t want to know that.’ she said.
‘Mom was admitted to the hospital.’ I told.
‘And you are telling me now. You could have told me before itself right. How is she?’
‘She has been discharged but doctors have asked her to be on bed rest.’
‘Please take care of her and extend your leave if she needs you.’
‘Ok listen, I will let you talk to my Mom as well tomorrow.’
‘She won’t mind right?’ she said.
‘Oh no. She asked about you as soon as I reached here.’
‘Cool then, I will talk to her.’

The next day, I made my first webcam call. We saw each other after six months. It took me a minute to realize we were really seeing each other. Until last night, I was cursing myself, cribbing about being an idiot who again messed up things when she finally made a plan to meet me.

I felt lucky to have her in my life. She made my world special with those small things she does every time. She never fought with me even if she wanted to. She just won’t talk. If I call, she won’t even ignore it. She will receive my phone but she would make sure that she doesn’t speak to me. That made me fall for her even more.

‘Abhi, you told I need to talk to your Mom.’ Aparna said.

She wore a green salwar kameez along with her new set of earrings just the way I had instructed her. Had she worn a top and jeans, I wouldn’t have taken the risk to allow her to talk to my Mom. She just doesn’t like it. It’s not that Mom is narrow- minded but then she has her own reasons and ways of looking at things. I think our elders just want to see that the new generation still listens to them. Mom smiled as she saw her.

‘How are you aunty?’ she asked.

I wondered, *How are you Mummy* would have sounded better.

‘Leave about me. Tell me about you.’ Mom said.

‘Abhishek informed about your health. You need to take care of yourself.’

‘These people just worry a lot. I am fine. Doctors said all the reports were negative.’ My mom said. Aparna laughed.

‘Even my Mom says the same thing, every time I ask her to take care of herself.’

‘I heard from Abhi that your Mom is good at embroidery.’

‘Oh yes, she is good at many things. She gets bored sitting at home if she doesn’t do anything.’

‘I wish I could do something like your Mom but I hardly get time. I need to meet your Mom,’

‘Oh yes. She would love to meet you too.’

‘It has been a really long time since I saw you. Meet me once you come here,’

‘We moved to Dhanbad aunty. That’s the problem but I will make sure that I meet you soon.’

‘Get your Mom as well. I want to meet her too.’ Mom said when I literally felt like kissing her.

‘Even Mom is not doing good for the last few days. She is tensed all the time about me,’

‘To have a daughter as beautiful as you, any mother would be tensed.’ Mom said. I pinched her cheek.

‘How is Mili didi?’ Aparna asked.

‘She met me yesterday. She is fine. I hope you had a good time in her marriage.’

‘Oh yes, and it was really nice to meet everyone.’

‘Then come soon and meet me. I am waiting.’ Mom said.

‘I will try to come aunty and please tell uncle that I asked him.’ Aparna

said. Shruti didi entered the room. Mom asked Shruti didi to speak to Aparna when she looked at my face probably finding an answer why I had asked for her laptop in the first place. I faked a smile looking at her. She didn't.
'Idiot.' Shruti didi mumbled as she came closer looking at me.
'Hi Di.' Aparna said showing all her teeth this time. She didn't look this happy when she saw me.
'Abhishek didn't even tell me that he was going to connect with you.' Shruti didi said.
'Yes, he is a dumbo. I even asked about you but he said you were busy?' Aparna said.
'Idiot, he is.' Shruti didi said looking at me.
'It's ok, he is like that only.' Aparna said.
'He thinks that he is smart but he isn't.' Shruti didi said.
'But he is a nice guy.'
'Ahem Ahem.' Shruti didi coughed looking at me.
'You have any doubt?' I asked.
'Shut up.' she said. Aparna laughed and why wouldn't she? After all, she was getting me screwed by my own sister.
'How is aunty di? I tried asking her but she didn't say much.'
'Thank god, the doctor has strictly told her not to move or else you don't know her. She barely takes care of herself.'
'Same story everywhere.'
'Yes, that is there.' Shruti didi said and looked at me.
'Ok fine, I think someone wants to talk to you now.' Shruti didi added and left.
'Ok listen, I want to say something to you,' I said as I came to another room.
'I know that you have some work now and you want to disconnect.' she said.
'Oh no, not that.'
'Then what?'
'I wanted to say that the girl who is wearing that green Salwar kameez, I love her more than anything in this world. So please take care of her and tell her not to miss me too much.'
'Ahem Ahem. So someone is trying to flirt.'
'When I don't, you say I am boring and when I do, you have a problem.'

‘Oh no, not at all. I am loving it. Go ahead.’ she said.
‘Nothing. I just wish if I can see you like this every time.’
‘Don’t worry. We will try to meet again. I will make sure everything just falls in place this time.’ she said when I saw three more girls coming in front of the screen. They were probably her friends she spoke about. They wore colourful tops with teddy bears and pajamas, unlike Aparna. They all wished me and then checked me out properly as if I was some face on a matrimonial site. I was feeling uncomfortable to see so many girls in front of me. Shilpi, one of her friends introduced me to her boyfriend who had come to meet her. I cursed him thinking *what was he doing amongst so many girls. Doesn’t he feel uncomfortable?* Moreover, my girl was there. I was getting possessive. He seemed a nice guy once we started talking. We spoke for some more time when Aparna finally came back. I was not enjoying it. Even though the guy seemed nice, I was not able to stop myself from hating him.
‘It’s ok. He is someone else’s boyfriend. You don’t need to worry much.’ Aparna said as he left.
‘Just don’t talk to him much.’ I said. She smiled.
‘Are you really saying that? Do you even think I will talk?’
‘Sounds good and remember, I love you more than he loves Shilpi. Just because he came to meet her, doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.’
‘I know that. You don’t have to keep saying that.’
‘Anyways I am here for few more days, so we can connect whenever you are free.’ she nodded and gave me a flying kiss.
I heard a knock at the door when I had to disconnect the call. It was dad.

Chapter 10

‘Abhi, get up and take bath. It has been an hour since you left the bed.’ Mom said. I read the prologue of the novel. Aparna had asked me to read it but I still didn’t have the patience to keep my ass at one place and focus my eyes on such thick novels to read about another goddamn murder mystery.

Worst part being, she never asked me to read any romance novels. I always wondered why and even asked her. She said '*there can't be a better love story than ours*'. I didn't know if she really meant it or she meant it the other way around. Because in our love story, we hadn't met each other even for once for the last one year. I was at home again after six months. I was leaving for Nagpur the next day when she was coming from Coimbatore. She was going to be with her parents like the last time. This was something we never thought we would face. Yesterday we had an argument, a big one, the reason being I was not able to meet her again. It was more like a one-sided talk where she kept listening without saying a word like every time as if it didn't matter to her. I always wondered if she would mute the phone and laugh on the other end listening to what I was saying. I hadn't even met Manish for a year. His Mom said that he would meet me in the Puja at my home the next day.

I turned the first page of my novel. The guy was being dragged into the woods by a serial killer. *That's it, I don't want to read it now.* In the last novel, the serial killer was a girl. I always felt all girls were romantic until then. My phone rang. It was Aparna.

'What are you doing?' she said.

'Reading your favourite novel.' I said.

'Good.'

'Still angry?' I asked. I still hadn't said sorry.

'You reached Dhanbad?' I asked further. She didn't speak.

'Look, I will make sure we meet next time.' I said.

'No need to meet me.' she said.

'Why are you talking like that? You know it upsets me.'

'Because I am coming to meet you.' she said.

'Good joke but I didn't feel like laughing,'. She didn't speak.

'Are you serious?' I asked keeping the novel aside.

'Yes, what do you think that I don't care about you. And it's all because of Anuj Jiju.' she said.

'Anuj Jiju? But how is that even possible?'

'His Mom is somehow related to my Mom's sister in law. My Mom was in Patna to meet my uncle last week and Anuj jiju's mom met her in some function there.'

'Are you kidding me?'

'No I am not. We are invited by his mother for the Puja tomorrow.'

‘But his Mom didn’t tell me about this.’ I said.
‘Because she doesn’t know that we both know each other.’
‘Oh yes, I get it now. So we finally meeting tomorrow?’
‘Yes, we are and please don’t miss me too much.’
‘Shut up, will you. I can’t tell you how happy I am. I will be there to receive you at the station.’
‘Abhi, I am already in your city, at my uncle’s house.’ she said
‘But you told you were going to Dhanbad.’
‘Because that’s how a surprise is given.’
‘You are confusing me so much.’
‘Even I was confused when Mom told me about some Anuj but then I found out it was your Jiju.’
‘I still can’t believe it.’ I said.
‘So you are happy right?’ she asked
‘Do I need to say anything? Waiting for you to come here.’
‘Listen Dad might come to Nagpur along with Praveen.’
‘But why are they coming there?’
‘Praveen has got a seat in some college there. So he might be coming in a few days.’
‘Your dad is tough to handle but.’
‘Oh stop it. You need to first do something.’
‘So did you tell him, you are still in touch with me?’
‘I told him that you are in Nagpur and you would help him once he reaches Nagpur.’
‘What did he say?’
‘Nothing.’
‘That’s the problem with your dad. He doesn’t say anything.’
‘It’s ok. Let him come first.’
‘Please don’t go in front of him with your stubble face.’
‘Excuse me. It’s my new look and everyone likes it.’
‘Yes I know that but my Dad won’t. So you need to be decent in front of him.’
‘Whatever.’ I said.
‘See you tomorrow then. I will keep now.’ she said when I saw another call coming. It was Manish.
‘Where have you been idiot? No calls, no contact. You have any idea how many times I have tried to contact you?’ I asked.

‘I am sorry. Was bit occupied with few things.’
‘Found another girl? Again? Don’t tell me.’
‘Shut up, will you. What do you think of me?’
‘Jerk, as always.’
‘Shut up and tell me how are things in Nagpur?’
‘Bad as hell. I hate guys and girls over there. Too advanced. They even stay together.’
‘What’s the problem with that?’
‘Oh no, not a problem until one of them finds another one.’ I said. He laughed.
‘Well, that’s the story even in Pune. That’s why we need to have someone we are in love with.’
‘When did you start talking so sensible?’ I asked.
‘I have always been that way.’ he said.
‘Jerk right?’ I said and laughed.
‘Abhi, behave yourself. I am no jerk now.’
‘At least you agree you were a jerk back then.’ I said.
‘You guys will never let me live in peace.’
‘That’s not happening in this birth, for sure.’
‘How about Aparna? Did you guys break up?’
‘In your dreams. She is coming tomorrow to meet me.’
‘Is it? You invited her to your home?’
‘Long story. I Will tell you tomorrow.’
‘So, she is coming to the Puja right?’
‘Yes, and you too are coming.’ I said.
‘Even Nidhi is coming with me.’ he said.
‘Just behave yourself, you two. It’s my home.’
‘Oh just shut up Abhi.’
‘Hahahaha.’ I laughed.
‘See you tomorrow then.’ he said and kept the call.

The next day, I was in the hall taking care of all the arrangements but my attention was at the door. I kept checking if anyone knocked or came inside thinking it was her. I had to remember a few things as she had asked me. I had to touch her Mom’s feet as soon as I see her. She had strictly said that I don’t even have to shake hands with her. I mean who does that. And another instruction was that we should not speak much with each other, for which I fought with her. I mean how could she impose so many things on

me but then somehow she convinced me and I had to agree.

Mili didi and Anuj Jiju sat in front of the Pandit when I saw Aparna entering our house. She wore a blue Saree just like her mom who wore a green one. I immediately greeted her inside as she had instructed and then touched her Mom's feet as soon as she saw me. I immediately asked them to have a seat and found one right opposite to her. She had told me not to talk to her but she hadn't told where to sit. A little later, Mom and dad came to the Puja room when I acquainted them with aunty. My mom insisted aunty to join her with the ladies group.

'Why you had to make my Mom leave? Look I am alone. What do I do now?' she messaged.

'I hate you.' she messaged further.

'If you want, I can come and sit beside you. I have no issues.'

'Abhi, don't you even dare come close to me. I am telling you.'

'Then stop complaining and let me look at you properly.'

'Oh please stop it. There are so many people around. If they see what they will think.' she messaged.

'Look, you can't say no to everything. After all, we are meeting after a year.'

'Thanks to me.'

'Oh please. If Anuj Jiju's Mom wouldn't have invited you, we wouldn't have met.'

'So bad. I gave you such a nice surprise and you are not even giving me any credit for that.'

'Just kidding. Thanks for coming and thanks for getting your Mom also.' I messaged when Manish entered along with Nidhi.

'Excuse me. Who invited you?' I asked looking at Manish.

'Oh shut up and get up now.' he said when I got up and hugged him. Before even I could talk to Nidhi, she went and grabbed a place beside Aparna.

'I don't need you now.' Aparna messaged.

The Puja started when my Mom along with everyone else came and sat in the hall. Aparna and Nidhi shifted to make some space for her Mom and my Mom. Shruti didi called Manish and me inside to prepare the prasadams.

'Enjoy.' it was from Aparna. I looked at her. She was smiling. I cursed her and went inside.

'You guys were supposed to be here.' Shruti didi said. I looked at her but I

didn’t reply.
‘I know why you both were sitting there.’ she said.
‘Not me. It’s him.’ Manish said.
‘Will you just shut up.’ I said looking at Manish.
‘It’s ok. She is not running away. You can meet her later.’ Shruti didi said.
‘He can’t. Her mom is there.’ Manish said.
‘Then focus here.’ Shruti didi said and left the kitchen.

A few minutes later, I saw her coming along with Aparna and Nidhi. Aparna entered the kitchen as if she didn’t even know I was right there. She stood in a corner. Shruti didi stood along with Nidhi and Manish. I stood alone in another corner.
‘I missed you.’ Aparna messaged.
‘That’s why you sat so far from me.’ I messaged.
‘You know, my Mom is here. We need to behave.’
‘I get it. But you can stand close to me here.’
‘You want me to get into trouble, right?’
‘Everyone is busy in the Puja.’ I said.
‘But they can see you through the hall.’
‘If you want, I can come near you, then.’
‘Oh no. Don’t you move from there Abhi. I am telling you.’
‘I will hate you for this.’ I messaged.
‘Why don’t you understand anything?’
‘Fine, stand where you are and don’t talk to me.’
‘I am sorry but I just can’t do anything.’ she messaged.
‘Are you angry?’ she messaged again.
‘Why should I be angry?’
‘Because you have someone like me in your life. Sorry that I came here and spoiled your day.’
‘It’s not like that but nothing makes sense to me if we are not even talking to each other.’
‘I know it. I will leave immediately after the Puja so that you don’t have to feel bad anymore.’ she said. I looked at her. She had tears in her eyes. She wiped them.
‘I miss my baby a lot, you know that?’ I messaged. She didn’t reply. ‘Ok, I will just wait for ten more seconds. You have to smile or else I will leave from here.’ I messaged further.
She smiled as soon as the message got delivered.

‘I hate you.’ I messaged.
‘But I love you. I love you so much Abhi.’
‘I know it. Me too.’
‘Ok fine. I will come near you but don’t do anything.’
‘What do you think of me?’ I messaged.
‘Idiot.’ she messaged and came closer to me.
‘You could have done this without fighting.’ I messaged.
‘I am scared. You have no idea.’
‘It’s ok. Even Nidhi is here. Why you need to think so much?’
‘I am a girl. I have to take care of things more than you.’
‘There are people who take care of you more than you think.’
‘It’s ok. You guys can talk to each other.’ Shruti didi said. Aparna looked at me and then at Shruti didi.
‘I came here to meet you didi, not him.’ Aparna said.
‘So sweet but I won’t mind if you talk to him. He was badly missing you.’ Shruti didi said.
‘Who me? Oh please. She came all the way to meet me.’
‘Excuse me. I came here to meet your Mom and Shruti di.’
‘Oh yes. That’s why you came inside the kitchen as well.’
‘That’s because we have so many people to take care of.’ she said. She never allowed me to win in any conversation.
‘Ok, I am sorry.’ I said.
‘You should be.’ Aparna said.
‘Oh my god. How you both fight?’ Shruti didi said.
‘She always starts it every time.’ I said.
‘And you end it every time.’ Aparna said. Everyone laughed.
‘I asked you guys to talk and not to fight.’ Shruti didi said.
‘You saw right, how she was speaking,’ I said when Aparna moved away from me. I saw Mom coming towards the kitchen. Mom took the plate from Aparna and Nidhi.
‘Who asked them to work?’ Mom asked.
‘Abhishek told them to help him.’ Shruti didi said.
‘Abhi, they are our guests. Do you even understand?’
‘It’s ok, aunty. We all met after a long time. So we thought we could be together for some time.’ Aparna said. Nidhi nodded. Mom looked at Aparna and smiled.
‘Shruti, stay with them and help them.’ Mom said and left. I glared at Shruti

didi. She didn't care as usual. Aparna never came closer to me after that. I looked at her. She still looked beautiful. I was barely able to take my eyes off her even for a second when she glared at me and asked me to focus on my work. I just wanted to thank her for what she just said to Mom.
'We need to meet outside.' Manish messaged.
'You mean we two?'
'No idiot. Four of us I mean. Long-time we had been together.'
'Ask the girl in blue saree. She throws attitude for everything.'
'Let me ask Nidhi to talk to her.'
Nidhi went closer to Aparna. Shruti didi was there too.
'Ok.' Aparna said. I still didn't know what the plan was.
'We are going.' Nidhi messaged me. The Puja got over in some time when the guests left. I had no idea if the plan was going to work but the ladies had said they would handle. Manish and I didn't intervene at all. There was a probability of our plan getting screwed if we did. Everyone had to play their part one by one. I checked the time. It was 4 p.m. already. Shruti didi came from the kitchen.

She handed over the tea to Mom and then to Aparna's Mom when she tripped and the tea fell on aunty's Saree. We all looked at each other as if we had no idea what just happened. Everyone looked real except Nidhi who had her mouth opened way wider than it was supposed to. She was overdoing it.
'I am so sorry.' Shruti didi said looking at aunty. Aparna's Mom didn't say a word.
'It's ok. We will wash it right away. Meanwhile, you can change.' Mom said.
'Oh no. It's ok. We will leave. It's already late.' Aparna's Mom said wiping her Saree. I patted my hands on my head.
'Mom but look at your Saree. How will you go like this?'Aparna said. Her mom glared at her.
'It's ok. I will give it for dry cleaning.' aunty said.
'But you need to wash it immediately. The stain might not go.' Mom said. Aunty nodded. She left along with Mom to another room. Dad sat their looking at all of us. I looked at Manish who was supposed to start his role.
'Ok uncle, I will take leave. I thought of dropping Aparna and her Mom but I guess it will be late.' he said sounding real.
'Why don't you guys go out for some time ?' Shruti didi said. Dad looked

at her and nodded after a few seconds.
‘But it will get too late now if we go out.’ Aparna said. I told her ‘*it should look real, not exactly real’*. She was spoiling everything.
‘It’s ok. No issue. I will give you a call you once your Mom has to leave.’ Mom said looking at Aparna.
‘How much time it will take aunty?’ Nidhi asked my Mom.
Mom looked at all of us.
‘I will give you a call. Don’t go far.’ Mom said looking at me. We left immediately. Nidhi sat with Manish on the front seat and I sat with Aparna in the back seat. Mom came into the balcony.
‘Oh no. Nidhi, Come to the back seat.’ I said. We swapped places before Mom could see us. We were going to the same south Indian hotel close to our institute where we used to sit for hours. The hotel had changed a lot but the owner was still the same. I remember how he used to come to four of us and try to talk in his broken hindi a few years back.
‘Vanakam Vankam.’ he said looking at us. We all nodded as we didn’t know what he meant by that.
‘Vanakkam uncle.’ Aparna said nudging at me.
‘Eat something. Too thin.’ uncle said looking at me.
Everyone laughed.
‘Eat non-veg. Protein need.’ he said again. I smiled.
‘Order?’ he asked when we placed an order for cold drinks.
We sat there for some time and then we left to visit the shores of Ganga. It was hardly a few minutes from there. The view in the evening was something. It felt nice amidst the cold freeze and the sunset. Manish and Nidhi preferred to walk on the beach when Aparna and I just sat in a corner.
‘There are a lot of beaches in the South too.’ Aparna said.
‘Yes, I have heard a lot from my friends from there.’ I said.
‘But this one is better.’ she said.
‘And why so?’ I asked.
‘Because you are here idiot.’ she said, patting her hands on her forehead. I smiled.
‘It was me who made this plan to come out of the house.’ I said.
‘What do you mean?’ she asked.
‘You almost messed it up there at home.’
‘Oh please, stop looking for credits.’ she said patting her forehead again. She looked cute.

‘Can I hold your cheeks?’ I asked.
‘No ways.’ she said and shifted away from me a little.
‘You know how much I hate you.’ I said.
‘Yes, I know that.’
‘Your surprise was good but it would have been better if.’
‘Look you are hopeless and when I do something you have a problem.’ she said interrupting me.
‘No I don’t but I wanted to spend more time with you.’ I said.
‘We can meet again if you don’t mess it up like last time.’
‘I said sorry about that.’ I said.
‘And that’s why I had to come with this surprise for you. You barely know to give a surprise.’
‘Oh, you forgot when I came to meet you in Dhanbad.’
‘Abhi, there is a difference between shock and surprise.’
‘I am not good at it but I am trying.’ I said.
‘Ok listen. You are meeting my dad. He will be coming to Nagpur in a few months.’
‘It would have been better if I had met him today.’
‘He wouldn’t have allowed me to come here with you.’ she said.
I laughed.
‘Is he really that bad?’ I asked.
‘Abhi, he cares for his daughter just like you care for me,’
‘I get it. I am sorry.’ I said.
‘It’s ok. It would have been really nice if you had stayed for a little longer.’ she said.
‘Had you told me about this surprise earlier, I might have changed my plans.’
‘I am sorry. I just wanted to surprise you and I didn’t even realize this earlier.’
‘It’s ok. Good that we finally met. You have no idea how much someone was missing you.’
‘I know that.’ she said when I got a call from Mom. We had to return. Manish dropped Nidhi on the way. We picked Aparna’s Mom from my home and dropped them to their relative’s home.

Chapter 11

I reached Nagpur station. Aparna had moved to Bangalore for her new job. Two years had passed. We hadn't met even once since the last time she came to my home. She didn't even know I was coming to meet her. The train to Bangalore was supposed to be on time. I checked the arrival time of the train. It was delayed by a few hours. I checked the time. It was 10:30 a.m.

Weekdays she was busy with her job and on the weekends she had joined an MBA class. I dialled her number. She didn't pick up. I dialled again when she picked up the phone.

'Abhi, Is it you?' she asked before even I spoke. I had got a new phone number.

'How did you know?' I asked.

'Don't know. I just guessed.' she said. I heard someone laughing.

'Aren't you in your class?' I asked. She didn't speak.

'I am with someone. Tell me,' she said after a few seconds.

'Are you busy? Shall I call you later?' I said.

'Tell me, why did you call? Anything important?'

'Nothing as such.'

'Abhi, you need to understand, I have my life too. You can't keep calling me whenever you feel like.'

'I just called.' I said when she interrupted.

'Come to the point Abhi.'

'Why are you talking like this? Are you upset about what I said last night?'

'I was thinking about it for a long time. Today, I thought I should tell you.'

'What happened? I am not getting anything?'

'Look, I am done with you.'

'I didn't get you,'

'If there is anything important, we can talk. I told you, I am with someone here,' she said.

'Are you with a guy?'

'Yes, I am. You have a problem?'

'No I mean, you never told about anyone'

'I don't think, I need to tell you about everything in my life. Anything else you want to talk about?'

'Hey, Did I do anything wrong? Tell me.'

'No. You haven't done anything wrong. How can you?'

'Aparna, please don't talk like this.'

‘Listen, I am sick of holding on to you. I told you, long-distance relationship won’t work.’
‘Did anyone in your family tell anything about me?’
‘Please Abhi, don’t bring my family into all this.’
‘Ok leave. Where are you now?’
‘Why do I need to tell you? Do I ask you if you are with anyone else or not?’
‘But what’s wrong if I asked you?’
‘Because I am sick of you and your excuses. You say you take care of me but I have no idea how. The only thing you want me to do is to focus on my career. Have you seen other girls? How happy they are? They go around places and enjoy themselves. What do I do? Nothing,’
‘You know I have been busy with my job thing.’
‘When did you ever understand what I want in my life Abhi?’
‘Aparna, there are some issues at home. How do you expect me to be like other guys?’
‘You didn’t meet me in the last two years. You must be having an excuse for that as well. Isn’t it?’
‘You know, I have been trying a lot to meet you but things were just not falling in place,’
‘Exactly. You have a lot of issues. Why don’t you try being with another girl who understands you?’
‘Look I am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you,’
‘No, I am sorry. I can’t take this anymore.’
‘But.’
‘Listen Abhi, I am with someone and we are busy.’
‘If you don’t mind, can I speak to you for a minute?’
‘It’s fine. You can talk to me. After that, I will keep.’
‘No issue. I will call you later then. Maybe you are not in a good mood right now,’
‘Oh no. Please don’t keep calling me. Tell me what it is.’
‘Who is the guy? Can you tell me that at least?’
‘Abhi, I don’t bother to tell you about my life anymore.’
‘Look, you are innocent. At least tell me who is the guy?’
‘He works with me.’
‘I didn’t know, you will leave me for nothing.’
‘Didn’t you? How many times I told you I hate being alone here.’

‘I am alone here too. I don’t stay with my family either.’
‘I know you have an answer to everything.’
‘Aparna, please tell me. Have I done any mistake? You know I won’t be able to take all this.’
‘Look, this is your problem. I don’t have anything to do with your life now,’
‘Why can’t you just tell me the problem?’
‘You are the problem. You get it. We are not kids anymore. Grow up.’ she said. I didn’t say a word.
‘You still there? Tell me fast. I have to leave now,’ she added.
‘So you don’t care about me anymore?’
‘Abhi, you need to understand. I have my own space. I want to be happy now. I am into a job finally. For god’s sake stop talking like that now.’
‘But I need to know what went wrong between us.’
‘No you don’t. I have already given enough explanation for everything.’
‘You know why you speaking to me like this?’
‘As I said, you can think whatever you want. I really don’t care,’
‘Because you have someone in your life and I don’t have.’
‘I waited for you. Don’t forget that.’
‘Did I not wait for you? Did I not do what I was supposed to?’
‘No you didn’t. Look around. You will see how people enjoy their life with each other. They hang out with each other,’
‘And then they break up. Don’t you know that?’
‘Some people do but not all of them,’ she said.
‘I am speaking about those who do. Why do they break up when they hang out and go on dates?’
‘Sometimes things just don’t work out Abhi. People have priorities just like you have over me in our relationship.’
‘There is a difference between priority and responsibility. I don’t have any priority over you. But yes, I know that love is not just about hanging around with someone to make them feel happy.’
‘Then what else it is about?’
‘Look at you. The way you take care of me when I feel helpless; when you understand things which no one else even bothers to; when you don’t eat for an entire day just because I had fought with you; when you pick up my call no matter how angry you are at me. You are my best friend. We are in no relationship. Please don’t use that word between us.’
‘Are you done?’ she asked. I didn’t know what to speak.

‘Yes I am and please be happy because I am not going to bother you anymore.’ I said and I disconnected.
I had never been so rude to her. Damn it. What happened all of a sudden? I never thought I will have to convince someone who understood me so well. She didn’t even bother to talk to me properly.
Nothing was sinking in my head. To surprise her, I came to the station and booked a ticket to meet her.
‘Shall I message her?’ I asked the inner me.
‘Why would she even bother to reply to your message?’
‘She loves me. I know it,’
‘She needs a guy who can be with her, take care of her. Don’t you get it? Moreover, you don’t have a job. How long she would have held onto a guy like you?’
‘But I am trying. Am I not?’
‘There are guys who are more successful than you and she deserves being with a better person. Don’t you get it?’
‘I can’t live without her but,’
‘Look she has found someone else.’
‘Is money everything? Is love nothing?’
‘But we all need money for a good life.’
‘I need some time. There are a lot of things in my life. Moreover, my health is going down every single day. Doctors are still not sure what it is,’
‘Exactly. Stay away from her.’
‘But she never told anything about it before. She always knew about my health issues but she never complained.’
‘Because she was being nice to you but how long can she live with a guy who is struggling so much in his life, be it your financial issues or health. She deserves a better life than this. With you, she will never be happy. She will suffer. Do you want her to suffer? Can you see her unhappy?’
‘Never. Not even in my dreams.’
I looked at my phone. There was a message. It was from Madhav, my roommate.
‘I met her today.’ the message read.
‘You met whom Madhav?’ I messaged.
‘Rashmi.’
‘She left you. Isn’t it?’ I asked.
‘She wants to be back with me. She misses me,’

‘Think before you do anything. You need to be careful.’
‘I don’t have any idea what to do,’
‘You spent so much time with her but still, she left you,’ I said.
‘What do girls want?’
‘No one wants anything. The problem is that few people look at others and keep thinking about why their life is not like them. They don’t want to live their life their own way,’
‘I am not getting you,’
‘Rashmi keeps complaining about everything. Why?’ I asked.
‘I don’t know.’
‘Because the problem has never been with you. It had been with the people she hangs out with or the couples she sees. She wants to live like them,’
‘Maybe. I don’t know. Not every girl is like Aparna,’ he said. I felt like telling him everything but then I stopped.
‘Look, ask her what does she want from you.’ I said.
‘I don’t even want to talk to her after what she did to me.’
‘Then stay away from her. You will make it even worse.’
‘How is Aparna? Did you tell her you are coming?’
‘No I haven’t told her. I want it to be a surprise.’
‘Great. And listen I am planning to go home.’ he said.
‘What happened? All of a sudden.’
‘I am missing everyone.’
‘When will you be back?’
‘In a week or two. Don’t worry, I have asked Vaidya to inform you if he receives your call letter.’
There was another call. It was Aparna. I ignored it.
‘Look I will message later.’ I typed.
‘Call me once you reach Bangalore.’
The train schedule was updated. It was coming before the stipulated time now. I looked at the tickets. I picked my bag to leave. My phone buzzed again. I reached the exit of the station.
‘Abhi please receive the call.’ there was a message. I didn’t reply. My phone buzzed again.
‘Abhi, please pick up the phone. Look after all that I told you, the only thing you did was to disconnect the call. You didn’t even bother telling me that you want to see me. This is what you did in the last two years. I miss you. I want you here. Don’t you get it? I have already spent years without

you.’ she messaged.
All that she was telling was true. This is what I had done with her all the time, disconnect the phone whenever she tells me to meet her. Damn it.
My phone buzzed again. I received it.
‘Abhi, why did you cut the call? I didn’t mean anything I said. You know it. How can you even think that I can really mean those things I told to you?’ she said. I didn’t reply.
‘Talk to me Abhi. I am sorry. Ok, tell me now what do you want me to do. I will do anything, please.’ she added.
‘Abhi you there? Speak up, please. You want me to fight with you? Is it? I am not going to do that. Look I was just trying to tell you that I miss you.’ she said. It felt like she was going to break.
‘Is this how a girl says *I miss you*?’ I said.
‘ Finally, you spoke. I knew it. I am sorry but do you leave any other choice for me? Is there any other way I can convince you to come and see me? It’s been so long.’
‘Maybe you didn’t mean anything you spoke but I realized that everything you said was true.’
‘I just don’t understand how to talk to you. I just did all that to make sure you that you come to meet me.’ She sobbed.
‘I called to inform you that itself.’ I said.
‘What? That you need some more time.’ she said.
‘That’s what you think of me. Isn’t it?’
‘That’s what you do every time Abhi.’
‘It’s ok. Leave. I am not even talking to you.’
‘Abhi please don’t do this.’
‘Is this how you treat a guy who is coming to meet you?’
‘Oh please, now don’t give me a lecture on that.’
‘Listen.’ I said when she interrupted.
‘Wait. Did you just say that you are coming to meet me?’
‘Did I say that?’
‘Abhi you just told. Where are you?’
‘Why do you ask that? Do I ask you anything?’
‘Ok Abhi, I am sorry again. Now, will you tell me?’
‘I am coming tonight.’
‘Are you serious?’
‘I am already on the station’

‘What?’ she said. Her voice sounded as if she had broken into tears. She didn’t speak for a minute.
‘Will you talk to me?’
‘Yes I am listening.’ she said sobbing.
‘That is why I don’t tell you anything.’
‘No not like that. I miss you more now.’ she said. Tears gushed to my eyes. I controlled them.
‘Had you told me earlier, I wouldn’t have had to speak all that.’
‘You almost killed me,’ I said.
‘I didn’t mean to but. I am so happy. Ok, give me a kiss now.’ she said. She never spoke like this in public before.
‘Shut up, will you? You are sitting in front of a guy and talking all this. Have u gone crazy?’ I added further.
‘So what? He is already occupied,’ she said
‘I didn’t get you,’ I said.
‘He has a girl just like you have one.’
‘Is it? I thought you left me for another guy.’
‘Abhi please, please don’t say that. I am sorry. I will never talk to you like that again.’
‘Nothing as such. I was just scared.’
‘I got scared more than you when you disconnected the call.’ her voice sounded dull.
‘Who is he but?’ I asked still possessive.
‘Chetan. He is my batch mate and I guess he loves his girlfriend more than you love me.’

I looked around. There were a lot of people on the platform but I wanted to do it. I stood on the chair I was standing close to and shouted *I love you and only you Aparna.*
‘Shhhh Shhhhhh Shhhhhhh Abhi.’ she interrupted.
‘What happened now?’ I asked. I could hear the echo of that announcement I had just made. I got down from the chair.
‘You are shouting.’ she said.
‘Yes, you are mine. Aren’t you?’ I said escaping those hundred eyes on the station who looked at me as if I was a retarded case.
‘Psycho,’ an old lady mumbled as she crossed me. I ignored. I had no other option. People are idiots. They are too serious. They don’t know what it is to be in love with someone and meet her after a long time. The lady who

was packing my idli at the counter smiled looking at me. She probably knew what love feels like. I felt like asking her but then I stopped wondering if she had a forced marriage. She might slap me. One more kiss came my way. Not from the lady packing my idli but from Aparna.
‘Abhi, I want you to meet Chetan. We met a few days back and he was the one who asked me to speak to you like that.’ she added.
‘Is it?’ I asked. I cursed Chetan. He almost got me into a life-long depression.
‘Yes. So, when are you reaching?’ she asked.
‘I will be late tonight. So, no need to come to the station. I will come directly to your place.’ I said.
‘Do you think, I won’t come to receive you? I am coming, whether it’s late night or anytime and that’s final.’ she added further.
‘Ok but come with your brother. Do that at least. Have you even told him about me?’ I asked.
‘Tarun has already asked about you so many times and he wants to meet you too,’ she said.
‘So you finally told him everything about me?’ I asked.
‘Not really. I was talking to you late at night a few days before. He had come to meet me and was there in the living room. I got too lost in speaking to you when he caught me sending a flying kiss to you on the phone.’ she said. I laughed.
‘Would you like to talk to Chetan?’ she asked and gave the phone to him.
‘Sorry for what Aparna did. My friend’s girlfriend did the same to him once and it worked.’
‘Don’t tell me.’ I said and laughed.
‘You know how things work here. I was in Mumbai back then.’
‘Girls are changing their ways to show love.’ I said. He laughed.
‘They have to if they love you or else we don’t listen to them.’
‘I agree. How are you?’ I asked.
‘For the last one hour, I am listening only about you. Thank God you called and we planned the whole thing to bring you here.’
‘I am glad to hear that you are coming already,’ he added.
‘Let’s meet up someday. I will be in Bangalore for a few weeks.’
‘My pleasure.’ he said.
‘I am coming tonight. Let me make some plan.’
‘Let’s meet up soon then. I will get Shilpa along with me too,’

‘Shilpa?’ I asked. I was wondering who is Shilpa now.
‘My girlfriend Shilpa, I mean.’ he said.
‘Oh yes. Aparna told that.’
‘Nice talking to you,’
‘Same here. See you soon then.’ I said.
‘What time is your train Abhi?’ Aparna asked.
‘Delayed for a few hours already,’ I said.
‘Oh no.’
‘Don’t worry I will manage.’ I said.
‘I will keep messaging you.’
‘And your MBA class?’ I asked.
‘I will attend that later. Ok, I am leaving for home now. Lots of things to do. I will call you soon. Message me your train number and coach details,’ she said and disconnected.
I sat on the same chair where I stood some time ago. I checked my watch again. It was 10:45 a.m. and sitting on the chair I remembered how we both met for the first time.

I finally boarded the train. It was running late by two hours and the only mode of entertainment left was my laptop. But then there was nothing new other than those few movies that had released lately. I tried watching them but then my mind was somewhere else. I wanted to reach Bangalore as soon as possible. I remembered that my laptop had something which could cheer me up in seconds. I mean, there was a folder that was dedicated to her. It had her solo pics, group pics, pics in western dresses, I mean jeans and tops. I did ask her to try skirts but she refused. And then there were pics which were my favourite, where she wore traditional south Indian sarees. She had mailed me all of them every time she attended any occasion. South India possibly has one or the other occasion to celebrate every month and she had become more like a south Indian girl now, at least in her dressing sense if not in their culture. Her way of carrying those sarees had a southern touch to it but to see them, I needed privacy which was not happening.

To my right was an elderly lady, who was busy with her phone and to my left was an old man, probably in his seventies reading his newspaper. But finally shooing off that privacy bell ringing in my head, I opened that folder. I was not able to resist anymore. I had just started scrolling through her pics when I realized that the old man to my left looked more interested in my laptop than his newspaper now. I gave him a glare and closed my

laptop immediately. Restlessness was never at its peak ever before. I needed something to keep me distracted. I was really hungry but I had strict instructions from her to not have anything as she was cooking something for me. I told her that I will help her but she insisted that she will do it by herself. I knew how good she was at cooking. The only thing she knew was to prepare tea. I was sweating badly too. I don't know why. Maybe the anxiety of such a long journey or that overwhelming feeling to finally meet her, I had no idea. And every minute or so, I was running to the washroom to clean my face but people in the compartment were thinking something else.

That elderly lady on my right even asked '*Is everything all right beta?'* for which I just smiled without saying a word. You can't expect privacy in a compartment full of old people. Just next to my compartment was a gang of young girls. Of course, they were all beautiful. Maybe they were all returning from a marriage ceremony as they all had their mehendi smudged hands still looking so orange. They were playing dumb charades and I was feeling really dumb sacrificing that compartment now. My seat was in their compartment when an old lady came and asked me to move to this compartment as one of her family members had a seat here. That family member was one of those girls and I didn't know then. And a little later she was joined by her friends who were beautiful too. I cursed myself but since I had already agreed to move to this compartment, I left from there. I had no idea, I would have this great a time for that huge sacrifice I made. Most of the time, I was feeling as if I was in an old age home and not on a train. I was repenting. And a little later those girls started playing antakshari. I repented even more.

Cursing myself for million times and that old lady for trillions, I finally reached Bangalore at 8:45 p.m. I was late by two and a half hours. The train could not make up for the delay owing to the heavy rain. I checked my phone to call Aparna when I found it was dead. My entire plan was already messed up due to the delay and now I was not even able to contact her. She hadn't reached the station yet. Maybe she was stuck somewhere in the traffic. Somehow I found a guy from my compartment. He was a south Indian who was working for TCS. We spent the beginning of our journey sharing each other's love story. The only difference being he was already married and I wasn't. Later on, he moved to the coach where his parents were sitting.

I used his phone to make a call to my roommate and asked him to inform me if he receives any call letter. I was expecting one from Patni computers and the other from Satyam.

‘Thank you beta,’ the same old lady said as she came out of the train. I looked at her as if she was the reason why the train got delayed, as if she was the reason why I had such a great time and she was the only reason why my girl was stuck in traffic.

I kept my luggage on the platform and opened my diary one last time. It was still so incomplete and I still had no idea why I was writing everything in it. I finally saw Aparna running down the stairs when I closed the diary and kept it inside my bag. She looked worried and tensed just the way I was. She wore a maroon saree. It was perfectly draped from her waist to the toe as if she had finally learned to wear a saree on her own. I could barely take my eyes off her face even for a second. I had no clue how she was able to run in those. She was drenched completely. Her hairs were messed up but still, she managed to look as beautiful as she was in those pics a few minutes back, with those curls falling on her face every now and then. Our eyes met finally. Slowing down her breath which was heavy, she got a smile on her face. She took my name on her lips ‘*Abhi*’. It wasn’t audible but I knew it. I could see that worried look still on her face. They hadn’t seen me for two years. She stood on the platform without even moving and looking at me.

I felt like hugging her as I came closer but then I realized I was on a railway platform and I curbed my feelings for some more time. But I guess she was missing me too much and she hugged me instantly. For a moment I was shocked to see her behaving like that in front of hundreds of strangers. All their eyes had turned towards us when I tapped gently on her shoulders.

‘What now?’ she said still buried in my chest.

‘I think we are on a railway platform,’ I said

‘So what?’

‘Where is Tarun?’ I asked.

‘He is coming with his friend Raj Kiran. There are no cabs. So he told he will get Raj’s car.’

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Welcome to South India,’

‘How did you manage to come then?’ I asked

‘Luckily I found an auto,’ she said and then she finally asked which I was

waiting for.
‘How do I look?’
‘I am not able to take my eyes off you,’ I said.
‘Thanks,’ she said.
‘You won’t change right?’ I asked.
‘What did I do now?’
‘When someone gives you a compliment, he expects the same in return.’
‘You look ok ok.’ she said. I laughed and then I laughed a little more. She hadn’t changed a bit.
‘When will you ever change?’ I said holding her cheeks.
‘Never. Give me your luggage now,’ she said, grabbing the bag which was barely heavy.
‘Take this one,’ I said handing her the heavy one.
‘No no, that’s heavy.’ she said. I laughed again.
‘Are we really meeting, after two years?’ I asked
‘I don’t think so.’ I answered myself.
‘Get used to this. I am not the same boring girl you left,’ she said adjusting her saree as she took that bag from my hand. I didn’t say a word. With every step I took on those stairs, I was taking one breath at a time, not able to take my eyes off her face.
‘How can someone so beautiful wait for an idiot like me who has never done anything for her?’ I kept asking myself .
And then for the first time, I actually looked at her saree closely. It was a Kanjiwaram Saree, I had gifted on her last birthday.
‘Doesn’t it look nice on you?’ I asked in an attempt to get another quote of thanks from her.
‘It is the best saree I have.’
‘After all, it was my choice.’
‘So you started again. You are not getting any thanks for this. It was my gift.’ she said. I smiled.
‘I missed you Abhi,’ she said suddenly.
‘Me too,’ I said.
‘But I missed you more,’ she said and smiled. I saw those dimples on her face after two years. We came to the exit where we waited for some more time. I made her have a cup of tea. Even I took one. It was the best tea I have ever had. Bangalore was turning out to be a great place already except that huge traffic which I could see, standing at the station owing to the

incessant rain. It had turned cold. A little later, Tarun arrived along with his friend Raj. They were just smiling looking at me and Aparna.
‘We will drop you and I will be going back to Raj’s place. Got some work.’ Tarun said as we sat in the car. I realized how smart her brother was to give space to us.
‘No need. You can stay at my place tonight?’Aparna said and instantly I realized how dumb she was. I wanted some time alone with her.
‘Actually, I have asked mom to prepare his dinner already and we have a few things to work on. Tarun has to do some practice for his theatre show which is happening next month.’ Raj said and I instantly felt that friends like him should be rewarded with Bharat Ratna.
‘Even Deepak is joining me,’ Tarun added.
‘But?’Aparna said when I nudged her this time. She was spoiling my plan which I had made just few seconds back in my head.
‘Ok but have dinner and leave,’ she said immediately.
‘Ya sure,’ Tarun said. He was staying in the college hostel. So he was anyways not going to be a regular visitor at her place which would give me extra time with her.
‘Boys, any girlfriends?’ I asked. They both looked at each other and laughed out loud.
‘Ask the lady to your left.’ Tarun said when I looked at the lady to my left.
‘Tarun shut up.’ she said and looked at me. I looked at Tarun.
‘She always shuts me up,’ he said. I looked at her.
‘Nothing Abhi, I just asked them to focus on their career.’
‘You told this to both of them?’ I asked, my mouth open.
‘Yes, what’s wrong in that?’
‘So, you say this to all the friends your brother has?’
‘Exactly! This is the time to focus on career and not on girls.’
‘Does that mean, I shall also focus on my career?’ I said. Tarun and Raj laughed instantly clapping their hands.
‘Stop kidding. That doesn’t make sense,’ she said.
‘And what you said makes sense?’
‘We are grown-ups.’ she said.
‘Leave it. No point arguing with her.’ Tarun said.
‘Moreover, they are from mechanical,’ she said.
‘Oh that’s so cruel guys,’ I said. I could feel their pain. My mechie friends waited all their lives to even talk to a girl.

‘Yes indeed,’ Raj said bringing me back to the topic.
‘But Tarun knows few girls. He does theatre and all,’ he added.
‘But every time they talk to me they ask me only one thing *Are you really from mechanical?*’ Tarun said. We all laughed.
‘Did you have any girlfriend there? You were from a computer background, right?’ Raj asked me.
‘Computer science guys have at least one girlfriend,’ he added further. I smiled and nodded.
‘Don’t tell me. You had one?’ Raj asked turning around, losing his grip on the accelerator. Tarun looked at me in shock.
‘Yes,’ I said. Aparna looked at me with her eyes popped out.
‘What’s wrong in that?’ I said.
‘Nothing,’ she said and looked away.
‘Her name was Nivedita.’ I continued without caring about the girl sitting right beside me. That anger on her face made her look even more beautiful.
‘Please continue. Ignore her.’ Tarun said
‘Hahahahahaaha.’ I laughed like an idiot. Aparna nudged at me to not continue.
‘Nivedita had a crush on me.’ I continued further.
‘Oh wow,’ Tarun said.
‘Then what?’ he asked as if he hardly cared that his own sister was in love with me.
‘Nothing. She used to be around me all the time.’ I said.
‘Everywhere?’ Tarun asked, turning his head towards me.
‘Except washroom,’ I said. The boys laughed. Aparna didn’t.
‘Really, is that true? She was that mad about you?’ Raj asked.
‘Yes. She was my batch mate. I had no option.’ I added.
‘Oh really?’Aparna said.
‘Was she beautiful?’ she asked.
‘Yes, she was,’ I said.
‘More than didi?’ Tarun asked.
‘Not even close to her,’ I said. Aparna smiled.
‘You guys went on a date?’ Tarun asked. He seemed more interested than his sister. Aparna looked at him, her eyes flaring with anger. I wanted to hide this one but I don’t know what happened to me and I said *YES*.
‘What?’Aparna said this time making her big eyes even bigger. She literally knocked me by her elbow as she heard that.

‘Not really a date. We just came out.’ I said.
‘We were just close friends as a matter of fact.’ I added.
‘How close?’ Tarun asked with a glow in his eyes.
‘Shut up Tarun,’ Aparna said, a little louder this time.
‘Hey, that’s fine,’ I said.
‘No it’s not fine Abhi. I am not liking this.’
‘Raj do you want to hear this?’ she asked
‘No ways.’ he said but I knew how badly he wanted to hear.
‘And Tarun you?’ she asked again with an authoritative tone.
‘No didi. How can he do that?’ he said. I was shocked to see how Aparna had control over them.
‘I hate you.’ she mumbled.
‘Nivedita is in Bangalore.’ I said.
‘What?’ Tarun and Raj looked at me with shock. They were still listening. Raj stopped the car taking a sudden brake and looked behind. Tarun almost felt as if I told him that he has a secret girlfriend and I know her. Aparna was already into tears.
‘Ok listen. Nivedita is getting married soon and I am taking my girl to meet her.’ I said.
‘But I thought,’ Tarun said when Aparna interrupted.
‘You stop thinking,’ Aparna said.
‘And Abhi, you stop talking.’ she added giving me a cold eye.
‘But we are going,’ I said.
‘And you think I will come with you?’
‘Yes because she wants to meet you,’ I said.
‘And why is that?’
‘Because she is not getting married to me,’ I said. She smiled.
‘Then I will come,’ she said.
I was happy that I could entertain all of them for some time. There was no way we could have killed that long time in the car without this. The huge traffic and water logging on the roads had disturbed even the highway. The city drainage system had failed badly and it was obvious in every corner we touched. There were traffic police out on the streets trying to help people in their best possible way. There were men working on open manholes which might have been a huge risk for people who were still out. I saw many cars broken halfway. Few were asking for lifts but no one was ready to stop. Even we were not able to help anyone, the reason being we were four of us

already and then there was my luggage stuffed in the back seat. There was no space left. Raj had to drive really slow as the wipers were not much of help due to the heavy rain. Every inch we moved we had cars in front of us either honking or dead already.

We were drenched completely and we had nothing to keep us warm except that one bottle of tea and few paper cups Tarun had kept while leaving the station. Aparna on the back seat looked worried. She was sometimes looking at those cars which were stuck and sometimes at me. She was worried about her brother who had to leave with Raj after dropping us and it was already too late. I told Tarun to stay back at Aparna's place but he insisted that he would go. It was then, that our car almost went dead for a moment when somehow the engine started after several attempts. After that, I had taken the steering and asked Raj to sit behind. We were still stuck on the highway when Raj asked me to take the inner lanes. We avoided the highway as much as we could and took every possible short cut through every lane when we reached Aparna's place. There was hardly any vehicle on the road. Raj left along with Tarun as he was getting calls from his Mom.

I kept my luggage aside as I entered Aparna's flat. A special fragrance filled the entire room. It was still dark. Aparna entered to switch on the lights. The first thing I saw, was a bouquet on the table right across me with a message written on it *Missed You Abhi* with lots of kisses at the bottom. I turned around.

'It's Not For You.' she said playfully as our eyes met.

'Ya, I know that.' I said smiling.

There was a table on the right side with a family album. Everyone was smiling in that photo. Just one person was missing there. Of course, it was me. There was a lamp in the corner. That might be the place where she used to sit and do her late-night work while talking to me on phone. She would tell me all those politics and affairs going on in her team. Further right, was a big cupboard which might be stuffed with all those dresses I had seen in the pics already. There was a small kitchen to my left which smelt of the food someone had cooked for me.

I had no idea how she did that because the last time we both discussed food, we ended up fighting on a big issue *who will cook the food after marriage*. It was me who was given the order to take care of that. The reason being, I cook tasty food. After that, I had stopped telling her my food recipes. I rushed to the kitchen and checked if she had improved in her

cooking skills. I had taught her a lot of recipes on those late night calls when she would not have anything to eat.
‘How is it Abhi?’ she asked. She was in the dining room.
‘You need to learn a lot.’ I said. It was better than I had expected. I came back to the dining room. Her face looked dull. She wasn’t looking at me. I came closer this time.
‘Someone has cooked the best food I have ever tasted,’ I whispered in her ears.
‘Really?’ she asked.
‘Yes.’ I said.
‘Ok tell me one thing. Don’t lie.’ I said.
‘Hmmm ask.’
‘You cooked it yourself or ordered it from outside?’ I asked.
‘Get lost Abhi.’
‘Just kidding.’
‘Huh.’
‘It took me four hours to cook that OK.’ she added. I was not asking for any statistics but someone has rightly said *girls don’t miss a chance to take credit for whatever they do*.
‘And get fresh. I have to tell you so many things,’ she said.
I thought she was hungry just like me. She had not eaten anything since morning but she wanted to talk. Girls always want to talk. On the phone, off the phone, before dinner, during dinner and even after dinner. I am so used to her talking that I feel something is missing if she doesn’t speak. I sat on the bed after dinner. The food was a little spicy. I got tears in my eyes while eating. I didn’t tell her. She would have felt bad. She wouldn’t have even hesitated in reminding me again how much time she spent in cooking it. She combed her long hair and checked herself one more time in the mirror.
‘Someone told she wants to talk,’ I said.
‘Oh yes coming,’ she said and sat on the bed.
‘Ok wait, let me check if Raj and Tarun reached,’ she added. They had reached safely. Aparna came back and sat beside me. She looked more beautiful with her hair left open.
‘I wanted to ask you a lot about Nivedita in the car but I couldn’t. Tarun was there.’
‘Is this what you wanted to talk all this while?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I am supposed to know about her.’
‘Look Aparna, we can talk about her some other day.’
‘Why you look so tensed?’ she asked.
‘Do I?’
‘Oh yes, you do,’
‘Ok fine. Listen,’
‘Go ahead.’ she said placing that pillow on her lap and looking right into my eyes.
‘Ok, that makes me feel uncomfortable.’
‘Oh come on. Will you please start?’
‘I met her in the fresher’s party which was delayed by a year,’
‘You mean in the second year?’
‘Probably around that. She approached me. I didn’t.’
‘Why didn’t you tell her, you have a girlfriend?’
‘Are you serious? I didn’t even know her then. And I am not supposed to keep telling everyone that.’
‘Look Abhi. It is better to be straight forward rather than dragging things till the end.’
‘Only if I knew that she would turn in to my friend back then, I might have closed it right there.’
‘Ok continue. I don’t want to argue with you.’
‘I refused to join her.’
‘Did she say anything?’
‘Nothing. She was a nice girl.’
‘What?’
‘I mean she appeared to be a nice girl to me.’
‘Good, continue.’ she said. Girls don’t like it when we call another girl nice.
‘I was a volunteer at the college fest the same year. So was she.’
‘Did you guys plan together to become a volunteer?’
‘I didn’t even know about the female volunteer till the last minute when she appeared on the stage,’
‘We handled the show well. After that, we met at the party,’
‘You never told me about the after-party stuff.’
‘I told you. It was on the same day. I just skipped that Nivedita part. She got drunk badly. So I had to drop her back,’
‘Excuse me Abhi. Did you go to her room?’
‘I had to. She didn’t know any of those guys present there.’

‘And then?’ Aparna asked, her fingers were crossed.
‘I reached her room. I swear, I started hating her that night even more. I never knew girls can get drunk that bad.’
‘Why did you even go there when you don’t drink?’
‘It was arranged by the management for all the volunteers. So I had to and I had no idea that drinks were being served.’
‘You reached her room.’ Aparna said reminding me where I had stopped.
‘There were two other girls. I mean her roommates.’ I said.
‘Why are you looking at me as if I have done some mistake?’
‘Will you please continue?’ she said, looking at me disgustingly.
‘I helped her inside her room. Her roomies were drunk too.’
‘What has happened to these girls?’
‘They knew me already.’
‘Probably that girl would have told them about you. How long did you stay over there?’
‘For some time.’
‘Abhi, I asked how long?’
‘Hey look, you trust me right?’
‘Exactly, but I need to know now. I am just curious.’
‘Half an hour.’
‘I promise, I was about to leave as soon as I dropped her but her roommates insisted if I can stay for some time to make sure Nivedita is fine.’ I clarified.
‘Good. Were they beautiful?’
‘Yes both of them.’
‘I get it.’
‘I know what you are thinking.’
‘I am not thinking anything. Please continue.’
‘After that, she met me a couple of times to thank for that night. I didn’t show much interest. She asked if I have a girlfriend.’
‘And you refused again?’
‘No, by now she knew me well. So I told her the whole thing.’
‘Good. So, after that, she never met you.’
‘That was the problem. She started getting involved with me even more,’
‘Did she ever ask you to come to her room again?’
‘How do you know?’
‘Did she?’

‘Yes, many times. I didn’t know, girls can do such stuff,’
‘Why didn’t you speak to her directly?’
‘I had never thought any girl would do that to me. I didn’t know how to react.’
‘Was she alone there, when she called you?’
‘No. I mean, her roomies’ boyfriends used to come there.’
‘I get it now. These girls have gone sick.’
‘You should have stayed away from her Abhi.’ Aparna added.
‘Do you think I didn’t try but she never listened.’
‘I am not going in her marriage now.’
‘Look, I want to show her the girl for whom I never looked at anyone else. These girls need to understand why we are like this,’
‘How did you get rid of her by the way?’
‘The evening when she came to meet me at my flat last year.’
‘Excuse me Abhi. Did she come to your flat?’
‘I had no idea how she found my address.’
‘And then?’Aparna asked.
‘She was crying. She said she loves me.’
‘Did she? Really?’
‘Even I didn’t believe. That was when I showed her your pics. She tried to hug me when I finally asked her to leave,’
‘Don’t tell me. And then?’
‘She left. She was still into tears.’
‘Good. She was supposed to.’
‘No, listen.’0
‘What happened?’
‘I saw something after that.’
‘What do you mean you saw something?’
‘Oh no. Nothing like what you are thinking.’
‘Please continue.’
‘There was another guy waiting outside after she left my room.’
‘Oh my god. What was she planning to do?’
‘Look, I tried my best to keep a distance from her after that.’
‘How come she ended up inviting you for the marriage then?’
‘I don’t know. I couldn’t say no to that.’
‘Is she marrying the guy who was waiting outside your flat?’
‘No. That guy was not even from my college.’

‘What the hell?’
‘These girls will get into a relationship with anyone to spend some time and then find another one.’
‘Is this a love marriage?’ Aparna asked.
‘I told you, girls like her get into a relationship with anyone they find suitable. They don’t even know what is love.’
Aparna shrugged.
‘Look that’s not our issue. It’s her life. These are the people who call love as a relationship. They can leave anyone anytime,’
‘Whatever. I am not going to her marriage in any case.’
‘But she has invited even you. Why don’t you get it?’
‘Ok fine. But I am not going to talk to her,’
‘Just come with me.’
‘Ok fine. Now let me show you something.’
‘What?’ I asked. She opened the cupboard and pulled a box packed with letters I had written to her.
‘You have still kept it with you? I mean, you girls are romantic.’
‘And you guys are dumb.’
‘It’s not like that. I am romantic too.’
‘When was the last time you even tried to be romantic?’
‘Oh please. When I try to be romantic you disconnect the call.’
‘Talking about career and job is not romantic Abhi.’
‘Excuse me, you forgot the video call that I made.’
‘I guess you forgot that I arranged the whole thing.’
‘And that evening when I took you to the beach when you came to my home. It was my plan.’
‘Manish made that plan. He told me that.’ she said.
Manish never kept anything to himself. Idiot.
‘I hate you.’ I said.
‘This is what you say all the time.’
‘Can we sleep now? I am really tired.’
‘Please go ahead.’ she said looking at the floor.
‘Are we really doing this? You want me to sleep on the floor.’
‘You want me to book a hotel for you,’ she said and opened her cupboard. She pulled a blanket and a bed sheet which were kept neatly. She made a bed for me on the floor.
‘Good night.’ she said.

‘Is this how you treat a guy who has come so far to meet you?’
‘We are not married yet?’
‘So what?’
‘Sweet dreams.’ she said. She had even kept the lights on. I woke up in the middle of the night. I looked at her. Her silky hairs were messed up. She looked even more beautiful. I switched off the lights and slept again. When I woke up in the morning, I found myself on the bed. Aparna was sleeping on the floor. She had made a bed out of my blanket and a blanket out of my bed. I tried lifting her. She was heavy. I tried again and made her sleep on the bed.
I came out for some fresh air. I saw ladies wearing a flower-like stuff at the back of their hair. They wore a saree for their morning walk. I wore a dhoti a few years back. It’s uncomfortable to even walk in that until one folds it up to the knee. While returning I stopped by a bouquet shop. Most girls feel that boys are not romantic. Maybe they are right because we have our own way. The shopkeeper looked at me probably judging me. I had already spent ten minutes right in front of his face and still hadn’t bought a thing. I felt confused. I had never been good at buying bouquets. I picked one finally.
‘Is it real or artificial?’ I asked the shopkeeper. It didn’t look real. The shopkeeper looked at me with disgust. The person beside me looked at the shopkeeper.
‘Ask him.’ the shopkeeper said pointing at the man beside me.
‘They are real.’ the man said nodding his head. The shopkeeper handed me the change. He looked upset. I left from there and reached the apartment. Aparna’s flat was on the first floor. The lady on the ground floor looked at me and then at my bouquet. I ignored her and reached the first floor.
‘What are you going to tell her?’ the inner me said.
‘Look, don’t expect from me much. You know how Aparna is,’
‘Do something. Make her feel special.’
‘I have come to meet her. Isn’t that enough?’
‘You don’t get anything.’
‘Look , I know I was not able to take my eyes off her last night but I don’t want to spoil this distance between us.’
‘She would have liked it if you had hugged her at least.’
‘Didn’t you see, how she made me sleep on the floor? She didn’t even care if I will feel bad.’

‘But she slept on the floor too’
‘That’s what I like about her. She cares but she doesn’t accept.’
‘But you need to do something. Don’t you get it?’
‘Look, I am not doing anything,’
‘A kiss won’t make any difference.’
‘But I just now decided to hug her.’
‘Grow up. You are not a kid anymore,’
‘Look, I don’t want to do what most guys do or probably every guy does. Aparna is different.’
‘That’s why you are boring,’
‘Look, you will get me slapped for sure. Stop bothering me,’
‘Ok fine. Then do what you feel like. Don’t blame me later.’
‘Whatever.’
‘Ok listen, pretend that you don’t know her. At least do that,’
‘What do you mean?’
‘When she opens the door, talk to her like a stranger,’
‘Will that work?’
‘I beg of you. Do that.’
‘Ok fine but what if she doesn’t get it,’
‘Don’t piss me off,’
I knocked at the door which I had left open while leaving. Aparna opened the door. She looked at me and then at the bouquet. I looked at her face. There were water droplets dripping from her cheeks. She might have taken a bath.
‘May I come in?’ I said.
‘Who are you?’ she said, looking at my bouquet.
‘I will tell you if you allow me inside,’
‘Listen, my boyfriend has gone outside and he would be coming back anytime. So better tell me what you want and don’t waste my time.’ she said but she couldn’t control her smile.
‘See, I told you. She would like it,’ the inner me said.
‘Ok, so would you like to go on a date with me tonight?’
‘Look I cannot cheat on my boyfriend. What if he finds out?’
‘Oh come on, I know him. He won’t mind.’ I said.
‘Oh really.’ she said smiling. I saw those dimples.
‘What if I hide it from him and come out with you?’ she said as she made some space for me. I entered slowly. Aparna took the bouquet from me. I

almost felt as if I was flirting with a stranger.
‘They are cute,’ she said and pinched my cheeks. I never knew flowers could be cute.
‘Mam you squeezed my cheeks. What if your guy gets to know?’
‘Oh, who cares? Get more bouquets like this and I will squeeze those cheeks again.’ she said and came inside shutting the door.
‘Say something about her,’ the inner me said.
‘Mam you are looking hot.’ I said.
Her eyes turned bigger as she heard the word *hot*.
‘You shouldn’t talk like that to me,’ she said.
‘But I guess you like me.’
‘Oh you are thinking a lot.’ she said and sat beside me.
‘Aren’t you scared with a stranger?’ I asked.
‘Oh yes, I am but I think you are safe to be with.’ she said.
‘So you can stay with any stranger without me, seriously?’
I don’t know what happened to me and I reacted.
‘Abhi we are just pretending.’ she said.
‘So where was I?’ I said.
‘On my bed.’ she said.
She never spoke like this to me. I had no idea what happened to her. I pulled her closer this time. She resisted but I held her tighter. I was about to kiss her when I stopped. Something within me said *it is not right and I shooed away that kiss from my mind*. But something else happened the next second. She kissed me on my forehead. It was our first kiss. Actually, it was her first kiss as I didn’t kiss her back. I got up and pulled her closer. My breath turned faster and so was hers now. We looked into each other’s eyes but we weren’t talking as if silence was the best thing at that moment. Maybe our eyes were doing all the talking and then I placed my hand around her waist and held her hand with my other hand.

She played a romantic song. I had never been good at my feet. If dancing was the only criterion, a girl could choose a guy for herself, I would have been single for a lifetime. Aparna came back and held my hand. She placed my hands around her waist. She was good with her moves. I had to learn a lot from her. We both moved like crazy for the next few minutes. I had tried dancing once in my college fest. People laughed at me. After that, I didn’t. I kept looking at Aparna, helping her with her steps. This madness continued for the next few minutes when I realized that the volume of the speaker was

too high. So, before the entire neighbourhood found out that there were two idiots who hardly cared if anyone gets disturbed, I lowered the volume.
‘Are we done?’ she asked.
‘I nodded.’ She paused the song and came back to me.
‘I have something to tell you,’ she said. I drank some water.
‘Can we talk about marriage?’ she asked.
‘I told you. It’s boring to get married.’
‘Same here.’
‘Independence goes. We start fighting a lot.’
‘You already fight with me a lot.’
‘Because you don’t listen to me.’
‘Look, even I want to focus on my career right now but my relatives have already started bothering Mom.’
‘Big deal. Just tell them that you are not interested now.’
‘You know how they are.’
‘I get it. Let me talk to my parents.’
‘And what if you get a job somewhere else?’ she said.
‘Look, I have chosen Bangalore as my first preference.’
‘If we get married, my company will allow me to relocate with you.’ she said. I could see how much she would have missed me all these years. She looked worried.
‘Let me convince my parents. I know that they like you.’ I said.
‘But still, you need to talk to them.’ she said.
‘Did you speak to your parents?’ I asked.
‘Yes, Mom is fine with us.’
‘And your dad?’
‘He is upset that he found out about the marriage from Mom.’
‘Does that make any difference?’
‘For him it does. It’s my first marriage.’
‘What?’ I said my eyes popped out.
‘I mean, it’s first marriage in our family.’ she corrected.
‘But is he fine with me?’ I asked taking a deep breath.
‘He is not actually, all because of our relatives?’
‘What problem your relatives have with me?’
‘Caste problem.’
‘But don’t worry I will talk to him.’ she added.
‘And what if he doesn’t agree?’ I asked.

‘You know I won’t marry anyone but you.’
‘I can’t live without you. You know that.’ I said.
‘Same here.’
‘No, it’s not the same. You know how your parents are. They will force you to marry in your caste.’
‘But I know myself. I can’t be a part of this non-sense. In my office, I see girls who have married someone their parents chose.’ she said.
‘Are they happy?’ I asked.
‘Except the ones who loved someone else. They miss their ex.’
‘Then why did they marry in the first place?’ I asked.
‘Their parents didn’t agree.’
‘How do they bring their parents only at the time of marriage?’
‘Boys are no better.’
‘But playing with someone’s life because your parents didn’t agree doesn’t make sense to me.’
‘They don’t want to put any effort Abhi.’
‘Exactly and things don’t work that way in our society. Moreover, they must remember that they were together for so many years not to leave like this.’ I said.
‘True. Ok listen, dad asked if you got any job.’ she added.
‘So what did you say?’ I asked.
‘That you are deciding on the job location.’
‘But that’s not the truth right?’
‘I can’t tell that you don’t have a job yet.’
‘That would be a problem. Is it?’
‘Of course. You don’t know how he thinks.’
‘I hope I will get the offer letter this week. They won’t pay me much but. I mean not more than you.’ I said.
‘Did I ask that?’
‘But still you need to know that you are going to get married to someone who earns less than you.’
‘But he loves me more than anyone.’
‘Where would be the treat from your first salary?’ she asked.
‘Will you ask me for a treat?’ I asked.
‘Of course. I won’t spare a single penny from your first salary.’
‘Then how will I spend the rest of the month?’ I asked.
‘My salary is there. You can take it.’ she said. I laughed.

‘Look, I have planned something?’
‘What?’
‘ I have finalized a place for our marriage.’ she said.
‘Which place?’
‘Arya Samaj Mandir,’ she said. I had told her that I wanted to marry in a temple. I didn’t want a grand wedding.
‘Is that a temple?’ I asked.
‘Not really. Kind of but. They have a marriage hall.’
‘But even you have to finalize the venue.’ she added
‘Sure, I would. We will go there someday. I need to call Manish too. Haven’t met him for the last two years.’ I said.
‘He will be getting married soon.’ I added.
‘Really? With Nidhi right?’ she asked.
‘Yes.’ I said when suddenly my phone rang. It was my Mom.
‘Don’t tell that you are in Bangalore,’ Aparna said.
‘Do I look like an idiot that I will say that?’
‘Yes.’ she said. I glared at her.
‘Don’t you dare speak in the middle Aparna.’
She nodded. I picked up the call.
‘Tell me, Mom.’ I said.
‘Who is this?’ a male voice said. Maybe, it was dad, and he was using Mom’s phone but the voice sounded different.
‘Abhishek here dad.’
‘Abhishek?’ he asked as if he was in a shock.
‘What are you doing in Bangalore?’ he asked.
‘How the hell he knows that I am in Bangalore?’
‘But I am in Nagpur dad,’
‘Oh, It means Aparna is in Nagpur,’ he said, his voice grew louder. I had no idea what my dad was speaking when I looked at Aparna who was patting her forehead and asking me to cut the call immediately. I looked at her with that ‘*What’s wrong with you?’* expression when she showed me that phone which was in her hand and I understood the whole story. We both had the same phone and somehow our phones got exchanged. Now I had no clue what to do. If I cut the call Aparna is dead and If I don’t, Aparna is still dead.
‘Abhishek you there?’ he asked when I disconnected the call and threw the phone on the bed. I was shivering.

‘Oh no. What have you done Abhi?’ Aparna screamed as I disconnected the call.
‘What did I do? You kept your phone close to me.’
‘I am gone Abhi.’
‘That’s true but even I am gone now.’
‘Go to hell.’
‘Now what?’
‘He will ask me so many questions now.’
‘Oh no.’
‘Change the sim card,’ I said.
‘How will that help?’
‘Change the phone then,’ I said.
‘And how will that help either,’ she said looking at me with cold eyes. I had no clue how to clean the mess . My mind wasn’t working.
‘Will he agree for our marriage now?’ I asked.
‘Shut up Abhi.’
‘Who told you to use the same phone?’ I asked.
‘You gifted me that.’
‘Oh yes.’ I said and cursed myself for gifting her the same phone. I felt it would look romantic.
‘Now what?’ I asked.
‘Keep quiet and let me think.’ she said. The phone rang again.
‘Pick it up,’ I said.
‘No ways. Dad will kill me.’
‘Do one thing . Tell him that there was a cross connection.’
‘Yes, how smart and the guy on the cross-connection was *Mr.Abhishek* , that too from Nagpur. Who asked you to tell who you are and where you are? I hate you Abhi,’ she said. She was rude and angry and mad and everything she could be at that moment.
‘Can I say something?’
‘No please don’t.’
‘Shall I talk to him?’
‘Gone mad or what Abhi.’
‘There is no other way now. Today or tomorrow he will get to know.’ I said. She took a deep breath.
‘Wait, let him disconnect. Let me think something.’ she said.
‘Take your time.’ I said. Aparna glared at me.

‘What?’
‘Nothing.’ she said when the call got disconnected.
‘Call your Dad and tell him that I had come here for an interview.’
‘Makes sense.’
‘Look, I am smart.’
‘But why did you tell him that you are in Nagpur then?’
‘Oh yes.’ I said. Aparna looked at me probably thinking if marrying me was the right decision or not.
‘You hate me. Isn’t it?’
‘No.’ she said.
‘Yes.’ she clarified.
‘Look, what would I do?’ I asked.
‘Abhi, my dad will think I am living with you. You told him you are in Bangalore.’
‘Look, we are getting married to each other in some time.’
‘They don’t understand this. The only problem is *what are you doing in my flat*’. Aparna looked scared. Her eyes had turned pinkish-red, probably ready to shed tears anytime.
I called her dad from my phone without telling her. I checked the phone twice. It was mine. No one picked the phone. I dialled the number again.
‘Hi uncle,’ I said, as he picked up the phone.
‘Who is this?’ he said.
‘Abhishek here,’
‘Was it you on Aparna’s phone right now?’ he asked.
‘Yes, uncle,’
‘You are in Bangalore?’
‘I had another job interview in Bangalore actually,’ I said.
‘Ok. So you are with Aparna now?’ he asked after a good ten seconds pause. I could hear someone murmuring.
‘Yes, uncle. We met outside for breakfast.’ I said and gave the phone to her immediately. I switched on the loudspeaker.
‘Hi, Papa,’ she said. Her hands were shivering.
‘When did Abhishek come?’ he asked.
‘Tell him today morning. Don’t say, that I came last night or we are dead for sure.’ I mumbled. She gave me a glare.
‘He came in the morning. I have come out to meet him.’
‘No problem. And where is he staying ?’ he asked.

‘I will tell him that you are staying with your friend and you have come just to meet me.’ she mumbled.
‘Yes yes, say it,’ I said.
‘He is staying at his friend’s place.’ she said.
‘Talk to your Mom once you reach home.’
‘Ok, Papa,’ she said and disconnected the phone.
‘See I told you nothing will happen.’
‘But how come he didn’t say anything?’
‘Say thanks to me.’
‘Get lost. You had almost got me killed.’
‘I am the one who saved you just now.’ I said.
I saw the phone ringing again. It was her Dad.
‘Hi Papa,’ she said on the loudspeaker.
‘Hi Apu.’ her mom said. I had no idea why both husband and wife were using each other’s phone.
‘Don’t worry. I spoke to your Dad. He is fine now.’ aunty said.
‘What did you tell him but?’ she asked.
‘Just that, Abhishek is going to be our family member soon. What is wrong if he is meeting you?’ she said. I was in love with my future mother in law. She was so unlike her dumb daughter.
‘He wasn’t angry right?’ Aparna asked.
‘He was angry in the beginning but he is fine now. Good that Abhishek told him the truth. I was standing close to him while he was talking to you guys,’ she said. Aparna gave a flying kiss to me. *She might be re-considering to marry me now.* She looked happy. And out of this happiness, she made me cook breakfast. When girls are happy, boys have to cook, when girls are sad, boys have to cook, no matter what they feel, boys have to cook. She wanted to eat Matar Paneer and Veg Biryani. I asked her for some help. She came to the kitchen with a dull face and helped me when I realized how pathetic my life was going to be.

Chapter 12

I had an argument with Mom. She was not well. I asked her to visit the hospital with dad but she was not listening to me. Moreover, she had sent me pics of a few proposals. I told her I didn’t want to marry just anyone but

she insisted to have a look. The girls wore sarees and bangles of matching colours probably ready to marry anyone.

Aparna entered the flat. She looked tired. She hadn't eaten anything since morning. I insisted her to eat but she didn't listen. She said she was fasting.
'I am sorry.' she said as she kept her bag on the bed.
'It's ok.'
'No, It's not ok Abhi. I promised that I will come early today.'
'No problem. It's still not too late. Did you eat anything?'
'No. I am hungry but.'
'Bad day at the office?' I asked.
'No just a lot of work.'
'Fought with the manager?'
'How do you know?'
'Just guessed. You look dull.'
'I hate him. He wanted me to come to the office tomorrow.'
'Ok leave all that and get ready. We are going somewhere.'
'But where? You don't even know any place here.'
I looked at her in my own way of telling '*Can you stop talking*'.
'Ok give me some time,' she said immediately and pulled out a mini-skirt from the cupboard. She looked stunning in those when she wore it as a trial last week.
'No ways. Not this. Jeans and top are fine.'
'No Abhi. I bought this skirt to wear when you are here.'
'Why didn't you wear it when you came to pick me that night?'
'No ways. There were so many people. Moreover, Tarun was there. What would he have thought?'
'Oh is it? And you don't care about what would I think.'
'You are my baby and I can wear it in front of my baby.'
'Whatever but you are not wearing a skirt,' I said and pulled out jeans and top for her.
'No, I wore it last to last weekend.' she said.
'Then try this,' I said pulling another set for her.
'Abhi please,' she said sliding that skirt towards me.
'No Aparna. Not with me.'
'So mean. Then with whom, I will wear these.'
'Wear jeans and tops. Even Saree is fine for me.'
'Saree! no way,' she said.

‘You look great in those but.’
‘At least not on a date Abhi.’
‘Why?’ I asked. She was thinking we were going on a date.
‘It won’t feel romantic.’
‘Oh is it?’ I said.
‘Yes,’ she said sliding that skirt furthermore towards me.
She looked dull. I couldn’t see her like that. The problem is with guys. They stare at girls when they see them in a short dress. I looked at her. I love her more than I hate a skirt.
‘Ok wear it. I have no issue,’ I said. She gave me a big smile.
‘Don’t tell me later, you have a problem with that.’ she said.
‘I won’t.’ I said. She thought for a minute. I don’t know what. She picked the skirt from the bed and kept it inside the cupboard.
‘What are you doing now?’ I asked.
‘It’s ok, I will wear this.’ she said pulling out the same jeans and top I had chosen for her.
‘I don’t get you.’
‘I am listening to you now. You have an issue with that?’
‘But just now you told you wanted to wear a skirt.’
‘I changed my mind.’
‘Then wear Saree.’
‘Ok fine I will wear a Saree.’ she said irritatingly.
‘Huh,’ she said and finally picked jeans and top to wear.
‘I am not wearing Saree.’ she said making a face.
‘And how are we going?’ she asked.
‘I have booked a cab. It will be here in thirty minutes.’
‘Thirty minutes?’ she repeated as if it was just thirty seconds.

The cab came on time. The driver had to wait for thirty more minutes. All credits to her makeup skills. It was 7:30 p.m. already. The cab driver sat patiently in his cab playing some loud Kannada music ‘*Ee Sanje Yakagide something’*.
‘Shall we leave?’ I asked her for the hundredth time.
‘Yes,’ she said and smiled. I didn’t. That stressed office girl whom I met a few minutes back had disappeared somewhere. I wore a yellow shirt and black denim. She wore a pink top with stripes and navy blue jeans. The driver showed me his waiting charges as we boarded the cab.
‘Please give him the money.’ Aparna said looking at the driver. He looked at

her without flipping his eyes. I cursed him and paid the waiting charges. He played a romantic number at a low volume from the movie Fanaa. I looked at Aparna. She was busy messaging some Suma from her office. It was fifteen minutes since we left when we got stuck in traffic. Aparna kept her phone aside and picked up mine. There was a message.
'Did you speak to Mom about it?'. It was from Shruti didi.
'What is didi saying?' Aparna asked.
'Nothing. I will tell you later.'
'No, tell me now. Is everything alright?'
'Yes, a little tension at home. I have handled it. Don't worry,'
'Why don't you tell me?'
'Mom sent these to me,' I said. I showed her the girls.
'They are beautiful,' she said.
'Yes, they are.' I said looking at her.
'I like the one in the yellow.' she said.
'She is fat.' I said.
'Oh please, just ask him first.'
'Whom?'
'Gandhi Bhaiya. Did he say anything?'
She was thinking these proposals were for him.
'You know how he is.' I said.
'Your Mom chose anyone amongst them?' she said
'Yes,' I said.
'Which one?'
'The one wearing a green saree.'
'She is nice. Are they all working?' she asked.
'Of course. I am not going to marry a non-working girl.'
'What do you mean?' she said and looked away from me.
'Thanks for showing me all this Abhi,' she sobbed.
'Let me explain.'
'Stop it Abhi.' she said. The driver took a side glance.
'Which one do you like by the way?' she asked sobbing.
'The one on my left,' I said looking at her. Her eyes turned wet the moment she heard that. Her lips trembled. She looked at me. A drop of tear dripped from her eyes. I wiped them.
'Why do you have to make me cry all the time?'
'Because I love you.'

‘Is this how you love someone?’
‘Yes.’ I said.
‘Don’t ever leave me. I will die without you.’ she sobbed.
‘I won’t.’
‘I spoke to Mom today,’ I added wiping her tears.
‘Really? What did she say?’
‘That you are from the upper caste but don’t worry. I spoke to her and I even told her that I am in Bangalore to meet you.’
‘Really? Didn’t she say anything?’
‘So what?’ I said. She looked happy. I deleted all those pictures from my phone. I had to make sure that she was in a nice mood before we reach the venue. I had planned something for her. I had been trying since a long time but it was not happening. I had got a call from Patni Computers. They had asked me to start with the joining process. The work location was in Bangalore. I was finally going to be close to her. I had found a flat close to my office so that I could talk to her for a few extra hours late at night. I looked at my watch. It was 8:15 p.m.
Chetan and Shilpa might have already reached Canopy.

Aparna had been forcing me to meet Chetan for the last two weeks. I had a few pending stuff of my own. Actually, I was feeling a little insecure to meet him. Ok fine, maybe I was jealous. Who wouldn’t? You don’t feel on top of the world when the girl you love talks great about another guy. Thank god, he had a girlfriend. I had heard his love story, three times in the last two weeks. It was so interesting that I kept asking questions from Aparna which went from ‘*how he met Shilpa Seshadri, how he fell in love with her* and *who proposed first*’. It’s important to know who proposed. In most cases, boys are the ones to propose but in his love story, it was different. Shilpa proposed him first after which he waited for few days to reply but then things got a bit messed up as it was too late. All guys are idiots. He finally proposed her in front of everyone in spite of being a shy guy. She was leaving for Germany in a few days. Obviously, he was scared if he loses her forever. She said yes and dropped her plan to go to Germany that night. It was quite a story for me to be happy about. We hardly hear love stories like that anymore. I somehow managed to get Chetan’s details from Aparna’s phone.

I looked at Aparna. She was still busy with the same Suma on her phone. Some Madhu from their office had fallen in the bathroom last night. She

was drunk. She had fractured her right leg and left hand, probably too big a reason to ignore me.
‘Did you guys reach?’ I sent a message to Chetan.
‘Yes, just now.’ he replied.
‘What are you wearing?’ I typed.
‘Blue t-shirt.’
‘And you?’ he asked.
‘Yellow shirt.’
‘What is Shilpa wearing?’ I typed.
‘A pink top.’
‘Aparna too has worn a pink top.’
‘All girls are the same.’
‘Five minutes we will be there.’
‘We are waiting for you guys.’

It took us two hours to reach M.G.Road. We had four tables booked already but I had asked Chetan and Shilpa to sit somewhere opposite to us leaving few tables until we arrive. They had no idea why I had asked that. I wanted Aparna to be surprised to see them over there. I saw both of them as I entered.
Chetan waived at me. He had a stubble look with curly hairs. He looked handsome. Shilpa looked like a traditional south Indian girl. No wonder, how she was able to find a guy like Chetan. Nice guys fall for only two things: *First*, if the girl looks traditional and *Second*, if the girl takes care of them more than their Mom. Well, that’s what I feel.

Aparna pointed at our table. We sat right opposite to Shilpa and Chetan. She untied her hair as she sat down and checked the menu. I picked up the menu but my focus was more on my plan. Chetan and Shilpa were looking at me, probably waiting for my instructions. I didn’t have any.
‘Abhi, I am coming from the washroom,’ Aparna said keeping the menu on the table and left. I immediately ran to Chetan and hugged him. He was really tall. Somewhere close to 6’3’’. Shilpa smiled looking at me.
‘She is cute.’ the inner me said
‘So what?’
‘Hug her too or else she will feel bad.’
‘She will slap me.’
‘Loser you are.’
‘Will you just shut up? Chetan might react if I hug her.’

Shilpa looked confused, probably thinking why they were asked to sit there or may be wondering why I didn't hug her. I don't know. I told them the whole plan and came back to my table.
'Did you order something?'Aparna asked as she returned.
'Just confused a little.'
'Let me see,' she said. I looked at Chetan and Shilpa.
Look at me guys. Remember what I said right.
They didn't look at me. Damn it. I looked around. There were married couples all over the place. Most of the men wore blazers and ties. It looked as if they had come for a formal meet up with their own wives. I looked at Aparna. She was barely looking at Chetan except for two things, *one* on the menu and *two* on that goddamn phone, chatting with Suma. Every girl has a secret friend from the office who knows all her details. I hate her.
'Come on Aparna look straight. Your friends are waiting to surprise you'.
She still didn't lift her face. I had to do something.
'They look cute right?' I said pointing at a couple left to Chetan.
'Where?' Aparna asked looking at me.
'There,' I said pointing at the couple.
'Yes, they are,' she said and returned to her phone again.
My plan was not working. Aparna lifted her head again looking at the same couple. I don't know why. I looked at the menu pretending I was busy placing the order.
'Abhi that's Chetan,' she said.
'Which Chetan?' I said.
'My friend from MBA class. I told you.' she said.
'Oh, you mean the couple?' I asked.
'No Abhi, look to your right.'
'Are you sure?' I asked.
'Yes.' she said. Chetan and Shilpa were still acting as if they didn't even know if we existed. They weren't even looking at us.
'Come on guys stop overacting,' I said in my head.
'How come they are here but?' Aparna asked.
'They might have come here for a date.' I said.
'Let's go and meet them.'
'Are you nuts? Let them enjoy.' I said.
'Go to hell Abhi,' she said and got up pushing her chair which made a loud squeaky sound. Everyone in the hall turned towards us. I faked a smile

looking at all of them. Chetan and Shilpa looked at Aparna. They looked more shocked than her.
‘Great guys. You are nailing it.’ I said in my head.
‘How come you are here?’ Shilpa asked as she hugged Aparna.
‘Abhi planned to come here for dinner.’ Aparna said.
‘Meet Chetan,’ she continued. I greeted them like an idiot. Shilpa was about to laugh.
‘Nice meeting you guys.’ I said pulping my teeth. I was not able to control my smile. Aparna looked at me.
‘It’s completely our pleasure.’ Chetan said holding his smile.
Aparna looked at Chetan.
‘What is going on here?’ Aparna asked.
‘Nothing.’ I said.
‘How come you guys are here?’Aparna asked. Chetan and Shilpa looked at each other and then they looked at me. I couldn’t control myself and laughed out loud. Chetan and Shilpa did the same. Aparna looked at us. She didn’t know what was going on.
‘Will you guys tell me something?’ she asked.
‘Abhishek asked us to come over here for dinner,’ Shilpa said.
‘I didn’t get you,’ Aparna said. She was still in shock. We all laughed once again except her. She had no idea what had just happened. We all sat together and explained the entire plot.
‘Very smart.’ Aparna said looking at me.
‘Thanks.’ I said.

We became an instant attraction for all the couples in the next few minutes. It had nothing to do with the two beautiful girls sitting with us but their talks which was loud and clear. They hardly cared if people were noticing them. I did ask Aparna to be a little less loud for which she gave me an eye. I minded my business with my new friend Chetan. She was not going to stop, I knew it. She was talking more and eating less. It didn’t take much time for me to gel with both of them. It felt as though we knew each other for a long time already. Chetan told the whole story, how he met Aparna and how he made friends with the most boring girl in the batch. That day, she was late to the MBA class and she approached him for the notes. When I asked, why she chose Chetan, she said ‘He looked the most innocent guy in the entire batch,’. I looked at Chetan. No doubt, that he was the most decent guy to be with. And then I looked at Shilpa.

‘Hug her bro.’ the inner me said.
‘Will you just shut up?’

And then Chetan told, how he literally forced Aparna to meet Shilpa one evening. Aparna refused because she wasn’t wearing a nice dress but somehow Chetan convinced her saying his mom was waiting to meet her too. She agreed. Aparna told, how Shilpa gave her a tight hug as soon as they met and they became best friends instantly. She met Chetan’s Mom as well who had prepared lunch for them. She was in love with south Indian food after that. After lunch that evening, Chetan played few songs on his guitar and Aparna realized, no girl would have refused to fall in love with a guy like him. I looked at myself. I felt lucky to have Aparna without a guitar.

After dinner, we went to the terrace of the restaurant where Karaoke was going on. I personally asked Chetan to play something on the guitar. He played a Hindi number. People clapped. He even sang for all of us. I had no idea, I was going to have such a beautiful evening with people I was meeting for the first time.

I told all of them about my joining in Patni and then I broke the news that my posting was in Bangalore itself. Aparna literally pulled my cheeks in front of them and told *‘Why couldn’t you tell me before’*. We celebrated the moment with few mocktails and even a tequila shot. It was my first tequila shot and my world was spinning after having that. Aparna and Shilpa refused to join us for the drink.

After some time, we left for the night. With loud music playing in Chetan’s car, we enjoyed our journey back to our place. Chetan and Shilpa had finally planned to move to Germany after a few months. We reached our room quite late. Chetan left immediately as he had to drop Shilpa back to her home.

Chapter 13

‘How is she?’ Mom asked, pointing towards a girl. She wore a blue lehenga and a lot of bangles.

‘She is nice, but please don’t point at someone like that.’ I said.

We were at a wedding ceremony. The girl gave up her job in a government firm to marry the guy. He was settled in the US.

‘Didn’t I tell you, he will like her?’ Mom said, looking at Shruti didi.

Shruti didi patted her forehead and left. I sat alone. Mom got up and went close to Dad. He looked at me and smiled. His friends arrived when Mom called me. She asked me to meet the girl. I refused and came back. I looked around. Most women had put make up more than their own daughters. No wonder why married men were looking happier than they usually are with their own wives. Free drinks and beautiful faces are what men look for these days. I looked at my Mom. She looked simple in her no make-up face. Anyways, I focussed on my dinner plate. The food was tasty. There was a call from Aparna. Due to the loud noise, I couldn’t receive it.
‘I will call you in some time.’ I messaged.
‘Love you.’ she replied.

Mom was having her dinner with the ladies while she kept looking at me, probably hoping that I will meet the girl whom she had asked me for. I barely spoke to her in the car while driving back home. Dad took the car on rent to take the entire family for the ceremony. Shruti didi kept looking at me without speaking as though she wanted to say something.

I was in my room reading my first romantic novel after a long time. Aparna had asked me to read it after I told her that I was about to talk to Dad about us. In the novel, the husband was having an affair outside his marriage with his wife’s old friend but he later realized that his wife was his true love. I had read the last page already. The suspense was killing me. I wondered if Aparna was suspecting me to have an affair after marriage.
‘You are in big trouble.’ Shruti didi said as she entered my room. I placed my novel aside and looked at her.
‘I am not getting you.’ I said.
‘I am talking about the girl idiot.’
‘You have been behaving weird since Mom asked about her.’
‘Her family had already approached Dad for you and you told that you like her.’
‘Not a big deal.’
‘The girl’s family already likes you.’
‘I don’t like the girl. I said it casually. You know it.’
‘I understand but Mom won’t. It’s better if you speak to her now before things get messy for you. Better speak to Dad on this.’
‘I am not talking to dad. He has changed a lot now.’
Mom entered my room and glared at Shruti didi.

‘What’s going on here?’ Mom asked. Shruti didi left.
‘Shruti didi told that you have already spoken to the girl’s family.’
‘You told, you like her.’
‘Mom please answer my question.’
‘Look, we all knew you would like her. Good girls are tough to find these days.’
‘I told about Aparna already. I am not marrying anyone else.’
‘Yes, you told me but this is a better proposal. Moreover, your dad knows the family for many years.’
‘Mom.’ I said when she interrupted.
‘And you know, they are even related to Anuj.’
‘What the hell Anuj Jiju has to do with my marriage?’
‘Don’t talk like that. He helped a lot in convincing the girl’s family.’
‘Look, Mom, leave all this. I need you to talk to dad.’
‘Abhi, your dad is so happy with this proposal.’
‘You bring up the topic with him. He knows Aparna anyways.’
‘Look we all know Aparna, I agree but we didn’t know, you both were planning to get married.’
‘I told you I like her. Didn’t I?’
‘Guys like girls but that doesn’t mean they end up getting married.’
‘Mom, why would I be in touch with her for so long then?’
‘I don’t know that. Your marriage proposal is from your dad’s old friend. I can’t say anything.’
‘You can reject it, right?’
‘And what would we say?’
‘Tell them that I didn’t like their daughter.’
‘You have seen her. You won’t get a beautiful girl like her.’
‘But I don’t want to get married to her.’
‘Don’t you understand your dad has committed to his friend. You kids don’t understand. It’s not that easy. We will have a bad name in society.’
‘Don’t give me that society nonsense. These people don’t even care once anyone is married.’
‘You don’t understand. Talk to your dad and say the same thing,’
‘And who asked Anuj jiju to get involved in my marriage?’
‘The girl’s family approached Anuj.’
‘And he proposed my name. Is that what you are saying?’
‘No, your dad had asked him to let us know if he finds a good family for

you. They turned out to be someone your dad knew already. What's wrong in that?'
'Aparna's family is good too. Why don't you talk to her parents? You know I won't be happy with anyone else except her.'
'Look Abhi, your dad is very serious about this girl.'
'Ok, then I will talk to him.' I said and got up from my bed.
'Abhi, not now. Better speak to him tomorrow.'
I came back. I flipped the pages of the novel.
'Did Aparna even speak to her parents about you?' Mom asked.
'Yes, she has.'
'Do you think her dad will agree with your marriage?'
'I don't know Mom. I don't even know if my Dad will agree.'
'Why don't you talk to her dad first?'
'He is coming to meet me next week.'
'And you are telling me now?'
'I have no idea what he is going to talk about. Let me meet him first.'
'You guys have grown up. Taking decisions on your own. You don't need us anymore.'
'Talk to Dad please.'
'Ok, I will talk to him.' Mom said and left the room.
The next day we were on the dining table having breakfast. I tried to talk but it was not happening.
'Abhi is leaving today.' Mom said.
'How is work Abhi?' Dad asked.
'Work is good.'
'Great. Did you meet Manish?'
'He is too busy these days. He barely even calls me.'
'Where is he now?'
'He is in Orissa working for a power plant.'
'I heard Aparna is in Bangalore.'
'She moved there a few months back.'
'You both meet each other there?'
'Sometimes. She helped me with my stay.'
'I need to talk to you about a marriage proposal.'
'I know. Mom told me.'
'The girl has a nice job and I know the family for a long time.'
'That is fine Dad but I think Mom would like to speak to you.'

‘I hope your Mom would have told you everything about her.’
‘Yes, she did tell me.’
‘You have time. You guys can meet each other before the marriage and let us know when are you guys suitable to marry.’
‘Abhi is meeting Aparna’s Dad next week.’ Mom said.
Dad looked at me and then at Mom.
‘What happened?’ he asked.
‘Abhi wants to marry Aparna.’ Mom said.
‘I was about to tell you.’ I said.
‘Look, I have already given my word to the girl’s family.’
‘Dad, I know that but I am not going to marry any other girl.’
‘I know that family for years. What else do you want?’
‘But I don’t know the girl. Did anyone check if she wants to even marry me?’
‘She won’t have any problem. I have already spoken to her parents.’
‘Dad, I can’t just marry any girl.’
‘Her parents don’t have a problem.’
‘Sorry. I will let you know after I meet Aparna’s dad.’
‘What shall I tell to Anuj then?’
‘He knows about Aparna. If you can’t, I will talk to him.’
‘Look, you are not understanding. It’s not that straight forward. Many people are already involved in this proposal and they have already intimated about you to their close ones.’
‘I didn’t ask them to do that?’
‘No one wants to lose this proposal. Moreover, everyone from the family likes the girl.’
‘But I like someone else.’
‘Don’t talk like that to me. Have some shame.’
‘I might have if you even try to understand me.’
‘We understand your generation more than you.’
‘I will let you know when you need to meet Aparna’s dad.’ I said firmly.
‘I am not going to meet anyone.’ Dad said. I looked at Mom. She didn’t say a word.
‘There is no point talking then.’ I said.
‘When did you start speaking like this?’ Dad said.
‘I am just requesting you to meet Aparna’s family.’
‘Do you even think before you talk? I have already given my word to that

family.’
‘But you never asked me.’
‘I told your Mom about it. She said she likes the girl too.’
‘I didn’t know, you and Aparna were planning to marry each other.’ she said.
‘Still dad. Don’t you think I should be asked before you give a word to someone.’
‘Am I not asking you now?’
‘Do I have a choice to refuse the proposal?’
‘Yes, you have but tell me what’s wrong with that girl. She has a government job.’
‘Government job is not everything dad.’
‘If you know everything, then you decide whom do you want to marry.’ he said. I left the table.
‘Talk to him.’ Dad said. I ignored and entered my room. I didn’t speak to anyone until the evening.
‘Look I will talk to him but not now.’ Mom said as she came to send me off.
‘I am anyways going back to Bangalore.’
‘Better call your dad once you reach. He would feel good.’
I looked at Mom. She didn’t care if I was feeling bad.
‘No one is going to talk on this matter from today. If Anuj jiju asks, tell him I am not interested.’
‘He talks to your dad. He never speaks to me.’ Mom said.
‘Take care of your health.’ she added.
The cab driver honked from outside. I didn’t say a word and left.

Chapter 14

Grand Avenues, 56 A, 1st Main
Jagdish Prasad
Bangalore

Meeting with a girl’s Mom is any guy’s dream but meeting with her dad is every guy’s nightmare. I hadn’t slept for the whole night. I reached Nana jee’s house. Aparna’s dad had asked me to meet him there. An old man dressed in white pajamas and a white half shirt opened the door. He had a

lense hanging on his neck too. Aparna had shown me his pics where he wore a suit. It was impossible to recognize him. She even told that Nana jee managed his house himself. It was more like a bungalow. I looked at my clothes, wondering if he would even consider to let me in. I should have at least dressed a bit properly. I looked like a government official in the dress I wore. Pink shirt and blue trousers. *How do I know that*? Because that's how I look at any government official. Aparna had asked me to look simple.
'Who you and what do you want?' Nana jee asked.
'Abhishek. I am here to meet Aparna's dad.' I said.
'Ashok, someone is here to meet you.' he said turning around.
'What's your name again?' he asked.
'Abhishek.'
'Come inside.' he said.
I touched his feet when I saw uncle coming. I bowed down and touched uncle's feet too. We entered the living room. Nana Jee and I sat down on the sofa. Uncle took the swing. An old lady came in with a tray. She looked old but fair. Her hands had a lot of bangles that did not make a sound while she walked.
'Have some water.' she said smilingly.
'My wife.' Nana jee said. I got up and touched her feet. Aparna had asked me not to miss a single opportunity of touching their feet. In her family, they like it more than a hug.
'Hope you didn't struggle much to find the house?' he asked.
'The landmark helped me finding the lane.'
'Everyone knows me here. I have been here for the last forty years.'
'But we hardly stay here for most of the year. We stay with our kids in US.' Nani jee said.
'When did you arrive?' I asked Aparna's dad. He was quiet.
'Last night. Aparna came to meet me.' he said. He got up and sat beside me. He wore specs. The magnifying glass ones.
'I need to discuss a few things with you.' he said.
'This is the apartment I am planning for you guys.' he handed me a brochure. *It means, he is fine with our marriage.*
'It is nice but I am looking for a well-furnished house on rent.'
'Rented flats are not good for a married couple,' uncle said.
'I agree.'
'Don't worry about the money. I have arranged for everything.'

‘But I need some time to decide.’ I said.
‘Didn’t you like the flat? We have more designs.’ uncle said flipping the pages of the brochure.
‘No. It’s like, we can’t take money from you.’
‘Look, I have to do something for my daughter. My relatives would ask me so many things.’
‘Yes but still. Actually, I need to ask my parents too.’
‘Look, I don’t want you to stay in a rented house after marriage.’
‘But Aparna is fine to stay in a rented house.’
‘We gave an apartment and a car for our daughter in her marriage. The boy’s side was happy.’ Nani jee said. She came and sat to my left. She had an album in her hand. She turned the pages and showed me the gifts they had given to the boy’s family.
‘I have to ask Aparna.’ I said looking at the wedding album.
‘Don’t you worry about all these things. She would be fine with it.’ Nani jee said.
‘Yes but I don’t think she would like all of this.’ I said.
‘Are you good with the flat?’ Nana jee asked.
‘Look, let me do something for her. She is my only daughter.’
‘But I am not taking the money from you.’
‘That’s your decision and one more thing. I have a date in my mind already. It would be coming September.’ he said.
‘For the flat possession?’ I asked.
‘No, for the marriage, I mean.’ uncle said.
‘You need to talk to my Dad on this.’
‘Is he coming to meet me?’
‘Mom told the girl’s family needs to meet the boy’s family,’
‘That’s true but only if the marriage was arranged. It would be better if your parents come and meet me in front of my relatives.’
‘I didn’t get you.’
‘Ashok needs his relatives to attend the marriage. So you need to ask your Dad to come to his home when his relatives are there.’ Nana jee said.
‘Look, if your dad meets me first, my relatives would be fine with the marriage. It shouldn’t be a completely one-sided affair.’
‘Actually, my parents are already expecting you at my house.’
‘Talk to them. We will come once they visit us.’
‘It would be good if you all visit our house first. It will be really difficult for

me to change the plans at the last moment.’
‘There are so many things Abhishek. Even we are trying to make things go smoothly. Your family needs to understand.’
‘I know that but I asked Aparna and she said you are fine, coming to my home.’
‘She is my only daughter. I would do anything for her but I need to remember that I live in a society where I have to take my relatives into account as well.’
‘The marriage date is too early but. My parents need time.’
‘The date is final from our end. I have already told all my relatives that we are not going to delay this.’
‘Let me see. I will try from my end.’ I said. I had no option.
‘Lunch is ready.’ Nani jee said when my phone buzzed. It was Aparna. I disconnected the call. We sat at the dining table.
‘How is everything going on?’ she messaged after some time.
‘Having lunch with your dad.’
‘Great. Did you take sweets for them?’
‘No. I am getting screwed over here and they don’t want sweets.’
‘Oh stop it Abhi. Just mingle with them nicely.’
‘Mingle? I don’t see our marriage happening here.’
‘I told you to get sweets. You don’t listen to me,’
‘I am sorry but I don’t think your dad likes me much,’
‘Wait for some time. I have a meeting, will message you.’
‘I will take leave.’ I said. I was done with lunch.
‘Don’t mind what I said. Try to understand my position.’ uncle said. I nodded and left. Aparna called me at night.
‘How was the visit?’ she asked.
‘It was good.’
‘You sound dull. What happened?’
‘Nothing. Tell me. How was your day?’
‘Look Abhi, I will talk to Dad if he said anything that offends you.’
‘Nothing as such. Just a few things are worrying me.’
‘He doesn’t want us to stay in a rented apartment, right?’
‘Yes and I am not taking any money from him.’
‘Guess what?’
‘Tell me.’
‘I have applied for a loan already.’ she said.

‘Did you?’
‘Yes I had to. I knew dad won’t let us stay in a rented house. He was upset the moment I told him.’
‘Now I have to convince my parents to meet your parents. You know how things are at my house.’
‘I asked Mom to convince dad but I don’t know if he will agree.’
‘And he has even fixed the marriage date. Can you imagine?’
‘Don’t worry about that. It’s better we get married as soon as possible.’
‘I had no idea our marriage would become this big a thing for everyone else.’ I said. She laughed.
‘You have no clue what is going on in my family. They have gone nuts about my decision to marry you.’ she said.
‘Because you have better proposals and still you don’t want to even meet them.’
‘No, it’s all because I have the best guy to get married to. They can’t digest that.’
‘I miss you.’
‘I miss you too.’ she said.
‘I will let you know once I speak to my dad.’ she added.
‘Listen.’ I said when she interrupted.
‘I love you. Good night.’ she said and kept the call.
After a minute, I got a message. It was from her.
‘Don’t worry too much. I am always by your side. I knew it will be difficult to convince everyone but I didn’t know it would be this difficult. But I feel happy that I have you with me and you should be happy too because I love you more than anything in this world.’
I slept off with a smile on my face.

Chapter 15

I wore a t-shirt with a teddy bear on it. Aparna had gifted it last month. We hadn’t spent enough time with each other since we last met. We had to plan a lot of things, on how to convince my parents on the marriage date. My dad was still not talking to me. He was angry, probably for everything I had told him when I met him at home. Mili didi told, she would try to do something. I checked myself in the mirror. The teddy bear on my t-shirt made me look like a student. I was about to leave when my phone rang. It

was Anuj Jiju. I stopped and picked up the phone.
‘Abhi, are you free? Can we meet?’ he asked.
‘You are in Bangalore?’ I asked.
‘Yes, I came yesterday. Can we meet now?’
‘Where are you?’
‘I am staying close to the airport. Need to return tonight. How far is your place? I will come there.’
‘Send me your address.’ he added before even I could reply.
‘Let’s meet outside. I will message you the address.’ I said.
I came back to my room and changed to a casual shirt. I dialled Aparna.
‘I am leaving in some time Abhi.’ she said.
‘Listen we can’t meet now. Anuj Jiju is here.’
‘What? But how come he is here all of a sudden?’
‘I don’t know. I need to meet him. I am leaving.’
‘This is the third time you are cancelling my plan.’
‘Let me handle him first. He needs to talk to me.’
‘No need to meet me.’ she said and disconnected the call.
There was a message from Anuj jiju. He had left already. I reached the CCD. Mili didi was there too. Anuj Jiju was busy reading a newspaper.
‘Sorry for coming late.’ I said.
‘No issue. We reached a few minutes back.’ Jiju said.
‘Where are you both staying now?’
‘I am here for office work. Had to meet you before leaving.’
‘Anything important?’ I asked. Anuj Jiju looked at me and then picked up the menu card. He ordered a cappuccino for me and Black coffee for Mili didi and himself. *Without sugar*, he added.
‘How is Aparna?’ Mili didi asked. Anuj Jiju looked at her.
‘She is doing good.’ I said.
‘I spoke to dad before coming here.’ he said.
‘Did he ask you to talk to me about my marriage?’
‘Yes, he told, you have an issue with the marriage proposal.’
‘I should have the liberty to decide whom I shall get married to.’
‘Look, there is nothing wrong with a meeting.’
‘How do you expect me to refuse after meeting her?’
‘Once you know her you wouldn’t want to refuse this proposal.’
‘I have learnt to trust someone through Aparna and she trusts me the same way.’

‘Meeting that girl will not break your trust. At least listen to your own dad.’
‘You have no idea what Aparna has done for me.’
‘I am not denying anything but don’t you remember what your family has done for you.’
‘I know where you are taking this. I am not leaving my family for her. She is the one who wants me to convince my family. She wouldn’t marry me without their consent.’
‘But your family is not ready for the marriage. Isn’t that enough a reason for you to not marry her?’
The waiter came with Cappuccino and black coffee. I took a sip.
‘Look Jiju, I am talking to dad. I know he will be fine with it.’
‘But even he wants you to marry that girl.’
‘We are not talking on this anymore I guess.’
‘Look, I know you met Aparna’s dad but you have no idea what is going on over here.’
‘Aparna’s dad is fine with everything.’
‘Can I tell you something?’
‘No, I don’t want to speak about my marriage anymore.’
‘Look Abhi, you are not getting things here.’
‘I am getting everything. Trust me.’
‘No you aren’t. What do you think Aparna’s dad doing?’
‘He is ready for the marriage.’
‘Have you seen the date he has fixed for the marriage.’
‘What’s wrong in that?’
‘In our caste, we don’t get married in that month.’
‘Now don’t bring a new topic. Why would he do that?’
‘If you don’t know, ask someone.’
‘You guys are taking things too far.’
‘Didn’t you see, he even refused to meet your Dad?’
‘He just told it would be better if Dad meets him first.’
‘You don’t get it. Aparna’s dad is not happy with this marriage.’
‘I am not getting any of this. Didn’t I say he is ready for the marriage already?’
‘I got such a nice family for you. Why can’t you marry that girl?’
‘Aparna’s family is way better.’
‘Look what I am saying is that let your marriage happen with that girl. Don’t complicate things here. Your dad will not be in a position to face that

family if we refuse this proposal.'
'And what about Aparna?'
'She will not wait for you if you get married.'
'You don't know her. She won't even get married to anyone.'
'That is just your thought.'
'No, it's not. Moreover, I can never be happy without her.'
'You only care about your happiness.'
'Everyone else is doing the same. Isn't it?'
'You are spoiling your parent's name.'
'No, I am not. I never asked anyone to find a girl for me. And we are not engaged yet. So, please don't tell me that nothing can be done.'
'So what do you want us to do?'
'Just convince dad to refuse the proposal.'
'But your parents and her parents have met Abhi. That family has already told about you to everyone,'
'Then what do you want me to do Jiju?'
'Tell Aparna that your marriage has been fixed and your family is forcing you to get married.'
'That is what you don't get. She has already rejected marriage proposals of guys who are well settled in the US. I earn half of what she gets but still, she does not have any issue with it. Which girl does that?' I said loudly. We were sitting in an open area. I checked around. There was no one else except us. Mili didi held my hand.
'Look Abhi you need to understand.' Anuj Jiju said.
'Tell him the fact.' Mili didi interrupted looking at him.
'What happened?' I asked. Anuj Jiju looked at Mili didi.
'Did your parents tell you about my sister's marriage?'
'No they haven't.'
'My sister's marriage is fixed with the girl's brother and I don't want to spoil this relationship. They will not agree with our marriage proposal as soon as they find out that you have refused.'
'And still, you want your sister to get married in such a family.'
'I am not asking for your suggestion. Try to understand. We can't lose such a nice proposal.'
'I am not asking you either. Go ahead and marry her but don't make me a scapegoat for this.'
'Look Abhi, you need to consider everything. Aparna's parents are

financially weak. These people are rich and well settled. What else do you need?'
'Now you came to the point.'
'Did I say anything wrong?'
'Marriage is all about money. Isn't it?'
'Money is important too. Your job can't pay even close to the dowry they are ready to give.'
'I never asked about dowry from anyone. It would be better if we can speak something else.'
'Don't forget I am your brother in law?'
'Do I have an option here? You almost fixed my marriage with someone without even my notice.'
'Your dad was aware of everything.' he said.
'Even you never informed me.' I said looking at Mili didi.
'They just told me about the usual talks that were happening.'
'She really didn't know anything about it.' Jiju said.
'So now that you know my decision, are we going to do anything about it?'
'Aren't you still convinced?'
'No I am not and I will not do anything stupid with my life for a girl I don't know.'
'You really don't care about your family?'
'Do you really care about your sister?'
'Yes, I do.'
'Then please don't get her married in a family and please talk to dad.' I said. Anuj Jiju kept silent for a moment. He left the table looking at Mili didi.
'I will try to talk to him. Don't worry.' Mili didi said. She left.

Chapter 16

I was at Kapoor's café. Muthu, my colleague was getting married next month. It was an arranged marriage and the girl's side was giving him a huge dowry. I wondered what made him announce the dowry thing. Muthu said dowry for them is like a ritual that the girl's family follows. They are paying seventy lakhs in cash and twenty lakhs worth gold in addition. Half

of my colleagues had their mouth opened as they heard the number. Maybe they got nothing because their faces looked more depressed than in shock. Muthu's ex-girlfriend was in touch with him until a few weeks back when he got this marriage proposal. He dumped her on the same day.

Rajan, my manager ordered a bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion. They poured a few glasses with ice cubes. The grand wedding was going to happen in Chennai, Muthu's native place. The single ones from my team were visiting his marriage. The married ones weren't attending for obvious reasons. I understood why most of the people are getting into arrange marriage these days even after having someone else in their life. They wanted money, easy money but Aparna still does not care, if her boyfriend earns half of what she does. She cares about me, keeps me happy all the time, fights with everyone so that we never leave each other. She never complains about anything in her life. No matter, if I don't take her to shop every weekend or sometimes even for a month. She is fine with those two cups of coffee we have every time we meet. She listens to my problems, discusses my future plans and keeps telling me, not to worry much about my life. Good things happen gradually, she says.

We continued with the starter. I looked at Muthu, just to see what it takes for a guy like him to leave his girlfriend and marry another girl about whom he doesn't know a thing. Is money that important? Maybe for a few people or maybe he never fell in love or else he wouldn't have left her. I still remember the day when he came to the office with a smiling face and told everyone that his girlfriend said yes when he proposed to her. He looks happier now. I wanted to ask him, tell him a few things. Does he even care what will happen to her now?

When you have to choose between marriage topics and food, I prefer the latter one. The food won't talk back to you at least. I focussed on my Kadhai paneer. It was good. Most of my teammates were eating non-veg. Free food for my office colleagues meant only non-veg. A message popped up on my phone.

'I am in Kapoor's café.' it read. It was from Aparna.

'I am with my team here.' I messaged.

'Where are you? I am close to the entrance.'

'I am sitting near the TV screen.'

I saw her. She wore a green suit I had gifted her. There was a guy with her. He wore a grey suit. He looked rich.

‘I saw you.’ she messaged.
‘Who is the guy but?’
‘Will tell you everything in detail later. Bye for now.’ she messaged again. She could have messaged *I love you*. I forgot Muthu, I forgot the party, I forgot that kadhai paneer. I was nervous. No. Maybe I was jealous or may be insecure. I couldn’t focus on anything. Nor could I look at her, sitting with someone else. I was really angry all of a sudden. She could have told me about this guy. Rajan picked another bottle of champagne to throw a toast. Everyone was happy. I wasn’t. My girl was sitting a few tables away with another guy and I had no idea who the hell he was. Muthu came close to me.
‘Abhishek, can we have a song from you?’ he said.
There was a Karaoke going on in the corner. I thought of telling them why don’t they just get the hell out of my face but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to spoil the mood. I got up. I thought of the most romantic song and took the mike.
‘What’s your name, sir?’ The lady to my left asked me.
‘Abhishek.’ I said. It was a mini announcement to the people sitting. Aparna turned towards me. Her eyes popped out.
‘Which song you would like to sing?’ the lady asked.
Without wasting a second I gave her the song name. She asked her team to play the tune. I synced with the tune, trying to make it sound as real as possible. People clapped. My team hurrayed. Aparna didn’t. I got down from the podium. Bala hugged me. Rajan patted on my back. Muthu pecked on my cheeks. I felt like slapping him. I was feeling even more embarrassed now. I shouldn’t have listened to them.
‘It was an amazing performance.’ Bala said. I faked a smile at him. We came back and left for the dessert counter. Aparna and the guy got up from their table. The guy went to another counter when Aparna came close to me.
‘Sung nicely.’ she mumbled. I checked the guy.
‘Enjoying. Isn’t it?’ I mumbled.
‘I wanted to tell you.’ she mumbled. Bala came close to me.
‘The girl to your left is beautiful machhi.’ he said. I glared at him. He was married for fourteen years, had two daughters and still he was talking like that. Aparna left. She didn’t take anything. She was on fast. We all came back to our table and enjoyed our dessert. I was a bit happy. She at least had

the courage to come to me and praise my singing skills. But I wanted to go to her table and punch the guy in his face. Damn it. Why wasn't I born rich?
'Let us leave.' Rajan said. We had an important meeting. I came out and sat in Rajan's car. We reached the office in another fifteen minutes which felt like just a few seconds. I was not able to breathe.

My mind was in a different zone, probably close to the point where an individual just gives up on his life. I wanted to go back to the café and check if she was not smiling talking to him. The meeting started. Thank god, I did not have to do the presentation. Muthu had to. I kept looking at him thinking why can't I be like him. The client threw some questions which Muthu answered convincingly.

The meeting was over. I immediately came to my desk and checked for my phone. There was no missed call, no message.
'Enjoy.' I said looking at the phone. I reached home. I thought of calling her but I gave up. I got fresh, picked up my phone and played some soothing songs. It was a few minutes when I couldn't control. *'That's it. I need to call her now.'*
'Hi Abhi.' she said as she picked up my phone.
'Don't you think it's too late to come back from a date?'
'I went to the office after that. And by the way, it was not a date.'
'Now don't tell me he was a guy from your office.'
'No he wasn't.'
'You only asked me to listen to my dad. I did the same.'
'Great and you both were looking good together by the way.'
'I am sorry that I didn't inform you.'
'What did he talk to you?'
'You won't believe. He was talking in numbers. He was more into his family net worth and those outlets they have in Delhi.'
'You mean he doesn't have a job.'
'His dad has a family business.'
'Did he ask anything about you?'
'Yes, like what opinion I have about arranged marriage.'
'And what did you say?'
'I said it is neither good nor bad.'
'Didn't you ask him anything?'
'Don't try to be smart ok. You know the reason and moreover, I don't trust strangers. They dress up well and speak nicely. You can't even imagine

what nonsense they might have done in their life. I just wanted to leave from there.'
'Not all guys are like that.'
'But no one is like you.'
'Do you have any idea what was going on in my head?'
'I had no other option Abhi.'
'You could have informed me before.'
'If I did, you would have felt even worse.'
'No I wouldn't have. Good that I saw you there.'
'Are you judging me?'
'I am just stating the fact.'
'I know where are you taking the whole conversation now.'
'The thing is, I don't want to talk about this anymore.'
'I don't want to talk either.'
'I know what makes you say that.'
'What do you mean?'
'I don't need to explain anything to you. You are anyways going to do what you want to.'
'Look I can't say no to dad for everything. I have to make sure that he understands that his daughter listens to him. You know I won't do anything that goes against you.'
'There is no point talking on this with you.'
'Great go ahead. Don't talk to me for anything.' She sobbed.
'I didn't say that.'
'But you meant that. You have any idea how much I fought with dad to convince him that I don't like that guy.'
'I didn't ask you to refuse.'
'No you didn't. But I cannot think of anyone else but you.'
'Then you could have informed me before meeting that person.'
'How many times I have to explain to you Abhi?'
'Look Aparna, I never say no to you for anything. I have no one except you and if you do all this I have no other option but to keep myself away from you.'
'My relatives are still forcing my dad Abhi.'
'Look Aparna, I am planning so many things and then I see you with another guy. It hurts.'
'I had no other option. If I don't listen to dad he would never listen to me. I

want him to meet your Dad Abhi. I want to get rid of all this now. I am sick of convincing everyone. No one is ready to trust me,' she sobbed.
'Ok, I am sorry. I trust you more than anything. You know it'
'Yes, I know that.'
'Then please understand, these things are not easy for me too,'
'I know but even I am facing so much pressure from everyone,'
'Ok, we better close this topic now. Did you eat anything?'
'No Abhi. I am fasting today. You forgot?'
'For me right?'
'Of course.'
'I love you.'
'I love you too Abhi.'
'That idiot Bala saw you.'
'I heard what he was talking about. Jerk. He is married isn't he?'
'Good that he didn't know who you are.'
'Abhi, please talk to your Dad and fix this whole thing. I am too tired of all this. Going and meeting strangers and behaving as if I had never spoken to any guy other than them is sick and disgusting.'
'I didn't ask you to do that.'
'If you were in my position, you would have known how difficult it is for a girl to handle her family.'
'I understand.'
'You have to. I don't have anyone except you. You know that.'
'I do. Take rest now. I will see you this weekend.'

Chapter 17

I sat at my desk and checked the phone. Tarun had messaged that he wanted to talk to me. I called Mom and Mili didi to check if they had spoken to Dad. Mili didi told that dad was convinced to meet Aparna's parents. I tried talking to him but he was not ready to speak to me.

I looked at my computer screen. There were congratulatory messages from my senior manager, Johnson. My first client meeting was good. Rajan told me that I handled the meeting pretty well. He was happy with my progress in such a small time. He told I can expect an early appraisal for the hard work I had put to make the client continue with our organization.

‘But wait for a year. It’s the company’s policy.’ Rajan said firmly as if he was the one who wrote those policies.
‘I get your point but I finished the whole project in half the time,’ I said when I saw a message.
‘Yes, but we need to wait. There are a few more upcoming projects. We need you to crack those too,’ Rajan said. I nodded. There was no point talking.
‘I will be back after a meeting.’ he said and left.
‘Abhishek, can we talk?’ I read the message. It was from Tarun.
‘Shall I call you?’ I replied.
‘I will call you, wait.’ he messaged.
‘Tell me. Is everything alright?’ I asked.
‘Are you guys out of your mind or what?’
‘Who, me?’
‘You and didi both.’
‘Why, what happened? Anything serious?’ I asked.
‘Did you tell anyone that you stayed with didi?’
‘No I didn’t. Wait, Aparna made me speak to one of her cousins, Shruti a week after I reached here.’
‘Really and you told her everything? And how do you know Shruti didi by the way?’
‘Long story. It was four years back. Aparna introduced me to her. Why? What Happened?’
‘She informed about your visit to her parents and told that you stayed with didi when you reached here.’
‘But why would she do so?’
‘I don’t know that but I got a call from my uncle.’
‘What did he say?’
‘You guys are in big trouble. What made you guys tell Shruti didi everything? My uncle is questioning me.’
‘Didn’t you tell your uncle that I was not staying with Aparna?’
‘How would I, when Shruti didi told that you were there?’
‘Shruti seemed fine talking to me that day but.’
‘Look once Dad gets to know all this, you guys are in big trouble including me.’
‘I had no idea this would happen. The more I try to fix things, the more things get messed up.’

‘My uncle was asking me to convince didi to stop meeting you. They are saying you don’t fit in our community. They are looking for a better family for didi.’
‘I need to talk to Aparna on this.’
‘Better you guys get married as soon as possible.’
‘You have no idea. There are so many things happening in my family as well.’
‘Ok listen I will call you later. Dad is calling me.’
‘Can you put him on the conference?’
‘Wait let me try.’
‘It’s not happening. I will call you later.’ he said and disconnected the call.
I called Aparna immediately. She was busy on another call. I checked Tarun. He was still busy on his phone. I had no clue what was happening. I left my office after some time. I was in no mood to work. I informed Rajan, I had a headache. I was scared if something really wrong was going to happen. I reached my room when I tried calling Aparna. She received it.
‘Sorry, Abhi. I was busy with meetings.’
‘Did Tarun call you?’ I asked.
‘No. Why what happened?’
‘Nothing. I just got a call from him but we couldn’t speak. I was busy with my office work.’
‘I will speak to him and let you know.’ she added.
‘Ok. When are you leaving?’
‘I will be late. So don’t wait for me and have your dinner.’
‘Come soon. I need to talk to you.’
‘Why you sound so tensed?’
‘Nothing. Just give me a call once you reach.’
‘Have your dinner on time Abhi. I will call you as soon as I reach.’ she said and disconnected. I immediately called Tarun but he didn’t receive my call. Aparna called me late at night.
‘Abhi, why didn’t you inform me about all this?’
‘I was about to but I didn’t want to spoil your mood.’
‘Shruti didi told everything to her parents.’
‘Didn’t you explain everything to your dad?’
‘He is not even ready to listen to me. He wants me to marry the guy I had met that day.’
‘I knew this would happen.’

‘Look I have no idea, how to fix this now. Even mom was asking so many questions.’
‘What are we going to do then? My dad is ready to meet your parents now.’
‘Someone has to talk to my dad before your parents meet him. He hardly spoke to me when I called him. He gave the phone to Mom.’
‘Let me think something.’
‘Why don’t we talk to Nana jee? He might help.’
‘Shall we? Do you think he will listen to us.’
‘He is the only person who might listen. He is not that conservative.’
‘I shouldn’t have stayed at your place.’
‘Will you just shut up now? It’s my family’s problem. I will fix it. You don’t need to blame yourself.’
‘I got you into trouble Aparna. Now what they will think about you?’
‘Let them think what they want to. I have no regrets. I love you and I am marrying you. If anyone has a problem, he should come and talk to me.’
‘We better speak to Nana jee.’
‘Sure. Take rest now. I will call you tomorrow,’

Nani jee smiled as she saw us. Nana jee looked at us with *what the hell you guys want from me* expression.
‘Did Ashok speak to you?’ Nana jee asked looking at Aparna.
She sat away from me on another sofa. She had asked me to maintain distance.
‘He is not even picking my call.’ she said.
‘He spoke to me yesterday.’ Nana jee said.
‘When did he call you?’ Aparna asked.
‘After he spoke to you. Look, what your dad is saying is not wrong either. If I was at his place, I might have behaved the same way. You have no idea how protective a father is for his daughter.’
‘I agree but he needs to understand before talking to anyone else, he must ask his own daughter.’
‘We belong to a very conservative society Aparna. You can’t expect everything to change in a day.’
‘It is really difficult to make sure everyone is happy.’
‘It is supposed to be that way. Even now, most of the arrange marriages happen under pressure. No one wants to live with someone they don’t know but once married, they get used to it.’
‘I get it Nana jee but for people who have someone in their life, at least they

should not be forced to follow these norms.'
'You are expecting these from people who have never lived in a society that broad-minded. It is tough. We never expected our children to go against our will and marry someone else.'
'But you supported your kid's marriage.'
'Do I have an option? I want them to be happy. If I force them, they might end up marrying someone of my choice but they will never be happy.'
'Exactly. Why can't my relatives understand that?'
'Because their kids listen to them. At least for now. You only try to understand your kids when they start going against you because you want to see them happy.'
'If I leave my decision on my relatives, they will never let this marriage happen.'
'Your relatives met your dad yesterday.' Nana jee said.
'What did they say?' Aparna asked.
'Look they have already suggested your dad, to stop you from getting married to Abhishek.'
'I didn't get.' she said.
'The next thing is to call you back home and get you engaged somehow.'
'But I have told them, I won't marry anyone else.'
'Once you go there, you don't know what they might tell you. Your dad, even he can't do much and he won't go against your relatives.'
'Then please talk to him, explain him.'
'I have spoken to him this morning. He wants me to convince you to reconsider your decision of marrying him.' Nana jee said looking at me.
'Which I am not going to do.' Aparna added.
'Look, it would be better if you both get married on your own in that case.'
'And what about our parents?'
'Look if your parents were really happy with the marriage thing, they wouldn't have been offended this much.'
'But Nana jee, we don't want to completely go against them. We want them to be happy with our marriage.'
'With what happened yesterday, they are for sure not happy.'
'Dad will never see my face if I get married on my own.'
'You need to decide. Don't think you can have everything in your favour.' Nana see said and paused for a second.
'Are your parents ready for the marriage?' he asked me.

‘I have spoken with them to meet her family. They agreed.’
‘Good. I would like to meet your dad then. Let me tell him that I would be there from Aparna’s side for her marriage if no one wants to. Tarun is anyways here.’
I looked at Aparna. She didn’t look happy.
‘Aparna’s Mom is fine. She doesn’t have any issue even if her relatives don’t come for the marriage.’ I said.
‘It won’t work that way. Both her parents should agree.’ Nana jee said.
I looked at him, with my eyes begging him to fix everything.
‘Look, I don’t want to get dragged too much into this matter. I am her Mom’s maternal uncle. I don’t think anyone would even listen to me.’ he added.
‘Dad might listen if you talk to him personally.’ Aparna said.
‘I told you. I am not getting into this matter. I can only support you both from here.’ he said.
‘It’s ok. I am there for her. I have never seen a girl who is against her own family for a guy. She really cares for him.’ she said looking at me.
‘But I care for them too Nani.’ Aparna said.
‘No need to care for everyone if they don’t care about you.’ Nani jee said and sat beside me.
‘You need to be with her. She trusts you more than anything.’ she added.
‘I try my best to keep her happy that but she takes a lot of tension.’ I said.
‘Because it is not easy to be born as a girl. Men don’t allow us to live freely.’ she said.
‘I agree but her relatives have a problem with that because they can’t digest the fact that a girl is taking her marriage decision on her own.’ Nana jee said.
‘It is weird that even now they think like that.’ Aparna said.
‘They are not wrong. We are all living in a society like that.’ Nana jee said.
‘But how long we need to stay like this. I want to get married now and move in with him.’
‘I am not refusing either but don’t expect anything from your parents.’
‘Ok, stop the discussion. There is no point talking in the absence of your parents.’ Nani jee said.
‘Call Ashok and talk.’ Nani jee said looking at Nana jee. He gave her a weird expression.
‘Look even you were against your own son.’ she said.

‘Our case was different.’
‘No, it wasn’t. You almost hated that girl and now you send gifts to her hiding from me. I know everything.’ Nani jee added looking at her husband.
‘She is my daughter in law.’ Nana jee said, looking at his wife.
‘Call him.’ Nani jee said. Nana jee dialled uncle’s number but he was not ready to listen to him.
‘It’s ok. Let’s wait for a few days. I will talk to him.’ Nana jee said as he disconnected the call.
‘Thanks, Nana jee.’ Aparna said. She got up and hugged him. I needed a hug too, a tight one.
‘What about me?’ Nani jee said. Aparna hugged her with a peck on her cheek.
‘We are always there with you.’ she said. I felt good, that Aparna had people who cared for her.

Chapter 18

It was a month already since I last spoke to Aparna’s dad. It was fine when he refused to talk to me but now he was not even speaking to her. Nana jee tried to speak to uncle but he didn’t agree. He wanted Aparna to marry the guy she met. He even told that the guy was soon moving to the US. Aparna refused. Since then her dad had stopped talking to her. I had no idea I would have to end up speaking to her father myself. I reached Dhanbad. Her Mom was happy to see me. Aparna’s dad looked at me grumpily. I expected that. Aunty was not doing well. She was in hospital for a week due to her health issues. I spoke to Aparna’s dad about our marriage. As usual, he didn’t agree. He was not happy with what happened without his knowledge. I tried to explain to him the whole thing. He told, I had put his name at stake in front of his relatives and he cannot take this marriage proposal forward anymore. Moreover, he was not happy seeing me as his son in law. No one was. He wanted her marriage to be a grand one, where his relatives could join him. He wanted her to marry someone, who was well settled so that he can take care of her.

He told me about the guy Aparna had refused to meet. He was rich of course, which I wasn’t but most importantly he could give her a life which I might not ever be. I did not even know how to explain to her dad that I

needed some time to fix up things in my life. He was not wrong to care for his daughter. Every dad wants her daughter to be happy and well settled. There is nothing wrong with it. Moreover, I already knew how difficult it was for Aparna to manage with me but she never said a word. I always wanted to do something for her but I couldn't. Life was never easy for me and it wouldn't be for her if she ends up with me. I didn't feel like convincing her dad anymore. I knew he was right. I left their home earlier than I thought and waited at the airport for a few hours before boarding the flight. Aunty insisted to eat and leave but I couldn't stay there even for a second. My mind was not working. I had no clue what to do and where to go.

Sitting on the airport alone I actually started thinking what if she really gets that guy who belongs to a great family. She would be so happy for the rest of her life. She won't have to be with someone like me who is still struggling to grab feet in his career and earns half of what she earns. How beautiful she would look in those expensive jewellery which he could buy for her which I might never afford and a luxurious life too which I might never be able to give her. She would never have to struggle in those bus stands just to meet someone like me. She will have the best life exactly how her dad, had dreamt for her. Tears just rolled down my eyes thinking about her and I kept hiding them from everyone. I realized, how much I wanted to see her happy for the rest of her life. I had never found myself this helpless before. I have not done anything in my life but she never made me feel bad about myself and my condition. She always took care of me. She always said I will do something with my life. The on-boarding started. I got up and joined the queue. I had no idea how she might react if I tell her that I came here but her dad didn't agree. I thought I will bring a smile on her face when I reached here. My phone buzzed.

'Abhi where are you?'. It was Aparna.

'Hey.' I said, fighting back my tears.

'I want to meet you Abhi. When are you coming back from the office?'

'I will be late. I have a lot of work today. I will meet you tomorrow.'

'But I want to meet you today.' She said. I felt like telling her where I was but I couldn't. She looked happy.

'But what happened?' I asked.

'I don't know. I was just missing you.'

'I was missing you too.' I said.

‘I will call you later. Is that fine?’ I asked.
‘No, I will call you at night. Bye and miss you.’ she said and kept the call. I boarded the flight back to Bangalore.
How would this girl be able to live without me? Why can’t she forget me and marry that guy? She knows that she won’t be happy with me but still she doesn’t want to leave me? Why?
I took a deep breath and boarded the flight. I had to tell her everything. She might just smile like every time and tell me that *Don’t worry Abhi, I am with you*. I hope we will marry someday and I could give her all the happiness, I have always wanted to.

My flight was delayed. I reached Bangalore around 9:30 p.m. I couldn’t call her as I was really tired. I slept without even having dinner.

It was really late when I heard my phone ringing. Every day I keep my phone on silent while sleeping but today I forgot. I picked up the phone. It was ringing the fourth time. Three missed calls, it flashed on the screen.
‘Abhishek? Is it Abhishek?’ a male voice said as soon as I received the call. He was very loud. Something was wrong.
‘Yes, this is Abhishek. Tell me.’ I said leaving my bed as soon as I heard that voice.
An unknown guy calling me at this time was not feeling right.
‘Hey, you need to come down to the Manipal Hospital right now. A lady is calling your name continuously,’ he said.

A stranger asking me to come down to a hospital for a lady was not sinking in my head. Everything was fine until a few hours back. Then what happened suddenly. For a moment, I wondered who was this guy and which lady he was talking about when my heart stopped beating as Aparna’s face flashed in front of my eyes.
‘Shit, I did not speak to her tonight,’ I told to myself.
‘Don’t worry, she is fine. This lady can be someone else and maybe he had dialled a wrong number.’ the inner me said.
‘But if he had dialled the wrong number, how did he know my name. No, something was really wrong.’ I was talking to myself.
‘Hey Hi, You there,’ I said getting back to the call.
‘Yes,’ he said, his voice louder than before.
The noise around him was not allowing me to hear anything.
‘Can you tell me the name of the lady you are talking about, please?’ I asked.

‘Wait let me find out,’ he shouted.
My heart was beating really fast. On one hand, I felt like disconnecting and call Aparna right away to check if she was fine or not but on the other hand, I had to wait to know who is this lady, he was talking about and why she was taking my name. Who gave him my number?

I kept waiting on the call but there was no response. I checked the phone every second. The call was still there. Every single second passing without any response was making me more and more tensed. He didn’t speak to me for the next few minutes. I saw a diary to my left. It had all the numbers and addresses of all the hospitals in Bangalore. I checked the name of the hospital that he just took on the call. I was not able to find it when I heard someone talking on the call again.
‘Aparna is her name.’ the guy said. My heart almost stopped beating as I heard that. Until now, I was telling myself that she is safe and sleeping but now I was aware that she was not. I was already in a state of shock to even speak a word when I jolted myself and came back to my usual mode. I was sweating badly. I was scared to even ask anything from him anymore. My throat had turned dry.
‘She is waiting for you,’ the inner me said.
‘Hey Abhishek you there?’ he asked.
‘Yes yes, I am here,’ I said.
‘Hey sorry for keeping you on hold.’ he said.
‘Everything is fine right?’ I asked.
I was shouting and even he was shouting. There was a lot of noise on his end still.
‘She is fine right?’ I screamed.
I just wished he tells everything was alright and it was some minor thing.
‘She has severe burns on her body. That’s all I know.’ he said.
I could barely hear what he said. I could not even imagine what she might be going through. She had never been able to even bear a little pain and this guy is saying that she has severe burns. Why couldn’t he lie to me and say that she was fine? I panicked. I looked at my watch. I had to rush. I had no second to waste. She must be waiting for me.
I ran to the balcony to see if there was an auto or cab so that I can immediately leave but there was none.
‘Hey, can you tell me where is the hospital?’ I asked holding the diary in my hand. I checked the name again but I was not able to find it. I had no

idea which hospital he was talking about. I just wished everything should be back to normal before I reach there.
‘What if?’ a thought came to my mind and I shooed it off immediately.
He gave me several directions. Every single word that was coming out of his mouth was there in my head. I was just praying everything was fine and she was doing good.
I locked the door and came down to check for a cab again. I found one. The driver was awake.
‘Anna, can you please take me to Manipal hospital?’ I asked.
‘600,’ he said.
I nodded, without wasting a second. I was still sweating badly and my entire body was shivering because of the thoughts that were running in my mind. I was really scared as I had no idea what happened to her suddenly. I had forgotten, that the man was still on the call.
‘Hi, you there?’ I asked.
‘Yes tell me.’
‘How is she? She is talking, right?’ I asked.
‘No, she is not talking. She has severe burns on her hands and legs.’
‘How come? Did you talk to anyone?’ I asked.
‘Listen, I have no idea. I guess the people who came with her have gone to get medicines. Doctors might be busy with other patients. Today there are a lot of accident cases in the hospital. I came here to see my mother. While returning I saw this girl alone in the room waving out to me.’ he said.
‘Anna, how much time it will take?’ I asked the driver.
‘Twenty minutes,’ he said.
He was already going at high speed. He might have understood, it was an emergency seeing my face and listening to my conversation.
‘Can you do one favour?’ I asked the man on call.
‘Tell me.’
‘Can you give your phone to her? I want to talk to her.’ I said.
‘Listen. There is no network there. I had to come down to talk to you,’
‘Ok, I am leaving now. I am getting late.’ he added.
‘Hey bro, bro, bro, please. Can you please be there for a few more minutes. I will be there in some time. Please be with her. Don’t leave her alone please.’ I said.
I was begging him to just stay with her until I reach.
‘Ok come fast.’

I spent the next few minutes in the auto dying to reach the hospital as soon as possible. The auto driver took every possible shortcut. We reached the hospital in a few minutes. I jumped out of the auto and ran towards the entrance to see if there was anyone. A huge crowd had gathered at the entrance and I could see several ambulances standing at the side still with their siren on. I saw a man in a beard smoking cigarette standing alone. He looked calm and quite unlike that tensed and worried me. He waved at me as he saw me coming towards the entrance. I ran up to him immediately.
'Abhishek is it?' he asked.
I nodded. I was breathless.
'Look go straight. Make an entry in the reception counter and go to the third floor, room no 308,' he said.

I shook his hand and left. I had no time to even say thanks. People gathered at the entrance had blocked the way to the reception. I was pushing everyone without even caring if they would get hurt or not. I was dying to see her face. Somehow, I managed to reach the reception counter in another five minutes and did all the formalities. They asked me if I am from the family and I said that I am her husband or else they wouldn't have allowed me to enter.

I ran to the third floor and reached there in few seconds jumping three steps at a time when I saw something I had never thought I will ever see in my life. I stopped at the door and looked towards her without blinking my eyes. There were people gathered in that room. I could see someone lying on the bed. That's it. I would not be able to see more. I just prayed that I was in the wrong room but the door read ROOM NO:308**,** exactly what the man had said.

Her swollen hand had turned red. I had no courage to move further but I took a deep breath and moved forward. I could see her face now. Her eyes blinked. She looked at me and tried to smile but she couldn't. Her hands were burnt badly and there were even burns on her legs. It was covered with a bed sheet probably to cover the burns close to her waist. I felt as if I was burnt myself seeing her body.
A girl who would cry for even a small injury was bearing a pain that could have killed anyone. And she was still smiling trying to show me that she was fine as if I did not know how much pain she was in. She had never done any bad to anyone. She had never spoken in a harsh way ever to me so that I don't get hurt. She had always made sure that the people around her

are always happy. She had been the reason behind this idiot who had once lost all the hope in his life. And today she is lying like this. Is this what she gets after being so good all her life. Tears rolled down my eyes as I saw her face up close. It had turned pale blue. She had no expression on her face as if everything was fine. Her fingers moved as if she wanted me to hold her. She wasn't speaking anything.

'Why it didn't happen to me? Why she had to face this in her life too? Why can't she be happy all the time? All her life she had struggled to live her life the right way? Why was I not able to feel that pain which she was hiding behind her smile?'

'Abhi.' her lips mumbled as I sat close to her.

She couldn't speak. I had no clue how she managed to tell that guy my name. Her phone was lying right beside her with my name flashing on its screen. I felt like taking her in my arms and take away all her pain.

'Don't call Mom?' she mumbled as her lips trembled.

She got wrinkles on her forehead as she said that. The only thing she cared about was her Mom when she was herself in a critical condition. She tried to speak more but couldn't. Tears rolled down my eyes one more time. The more I was trying to control them, the more they were flowing. I had never felt so weak before.

'Don't worry I am here. You will be fine soon. I will sit here with my angel and not go anywhere.' I said sitting right beside her.

Tears came gushing to her eyes but she stopped as I noticed them. I knew how badly she wanted to scream out loud to overcome that pain but she was not even able to do that. I knew how badly she wanted to tell me that the pain was killing her but she was lying on that bed silent, without uttering a word as if nothing had happened.

I once again realized what she meant to me and if anything happens to her, my world would come to an end instantly. I will not be able to live for a second without her. Her body was shaking but I had no idea how she was able to bear it. I could see that peeled skin on her body but how could I. It had turned red and the portion around that burnt skin had swollen. The skin on her hands and legs were peeled off.

Why can't I do something to make her feel even a little better? Why can't I bring that smile on her face right now just like every time before?

I told her that I will call her at night but I forgot, owing to how tired I was after returning from her home. Due to the journey, my phone was off all the

time. She might have tried a lot but seeing no response she might have stopped. She must have been worried after seeing my phone switched off. Had I not gone to her home, this might have never happened.
‘Abhishek right?’ a female voice said.
She was the same lady who was staying on the ground floor in Aparna’s building. I stood up immediately as I saw her.
‘Yes?’ I said.
‘We had no time to waste, so we got her here right away. She was screaming badly until we came here and met the doctor. They have given her some medication as of now.’ she said and handed me a list with medicines I had to get for her.
‘Where is her brother?’ she asked.
‘I need to call him,’
‘And her parents! Did you inform them?’
‘Her Mom is not well. So she doesn’t want me to call them.’
‘Everything is fine right?’ I asked.
‘I don’t know.’
‘Where are the doctors? Did you get a chance to talk to them?’
‘No, I couldn’t but they will be here in some time. There are many patients today.’ aunty said.

Aparna didn’t take her eyes off me since I had arrived. I was in a position where I can’t even tell her ‘*Just wait for some time. Everything will be fine’*.
Things were not in my hands this time. I looked at her again when she finally shed a drop of tear which was enough to tell me how she was bearing everything. I wiped it off when tears came gushing through her eyes as if she couldn’t bear it anymore. She held my hands as I wiped her tears.
‘There he is.’ aunty said as she saw the doctor coming.
He was in a hurry.
‘Can you please leave the room?’ the doctor said looking at me.

I came out of the emergency ward but stood close to the door. I informed Tarun. He left for the hospital immediately. Aunty left the hospital. She was going to be back if needed. The nurse came outside after a few minutes.
‘Don’t worry, we have started giving insulin to her,’ she said.
I looked at her just to hear that she will be alright soon but she didn’t say anything and left. Everything that I had seen was rewinding in my head. I had seen people dying, I had seen people losing their closed ones but I had

never seen anyone in this bad condition. I made a few phone calls to my office colleagues and informed them about everything. I cancelled all the meetings in the coming week. My colleagues asked me to let them know if I need anything.

It was 2 a.m. when I saw Raj and Tarun finally there. I felt relieved to see them as I needed someone badly. I told them the whole situation but the only thing they were willing to know was *if she was fine or not, how long will it take for her to get discharged, how did this all happen and when will they be able to meet her.*

I was trying to distract Tarun's attention from the fact that his own sister was in a critical condition. I don't know how but he realized how tensed and panicked I was myself even after getting regular updates from the nurses. He kept his hand on my shoulders and hugged me. I badly needed it. The nurse who was in regular contact with me informed us that the doctor will allow us to meet her in some time. *We had to wear a mask before entering the room* was the only thing she told before she left. We had to collect it from the counter on the second floor.

Raj left to get it for us. Tarun tried to relieve me somehow. He was talking about random things but nothing was going in my head except that one face which was suffering right now. She hadn't spoken to me properly even for once since I had come over here.

She should be fine soon is all I could think of. The next second I got a phone call from my new manager. He asked about Aparna. I told him I would be meeting the doctor soon. He got the news from my colleagues, I had informed. He told, he has few contacts with the best hospitals and if needed, I could just drop him a message. Raj came back with the masks when the nurse came out along with the doctor asking us to be ready.

'How is she now?' Tarun asked the doctor.

The doctor looked in a hurry but seeing the expression on our faces, he cared to respond.

'There are third-degree burns on her body. Maybe the water that caused this was at boiling temperature. The worse part being, her upper body has got affected more than her hands. Due to severe burns, we have kept her in Intense care unit. The tissues of her legs and hands are damaged due to the skin rupture. As the cloth she was wearing was stuck to her body until she reached the hospital, it has caused the skin to loosen and damaged the burnt portion even more. At the hospital when they took off the clothes from the

burnt area, it had peeled all the skin from the surface. We need to wait for some more time to see how critical her condition is.'

Tarun looked at him, his eyes full of questions just like mine.

'She will be fine right?' Tarun asked.

'Look, the hands and legs are severely burnt and the only thing we are trying to prevent is the inner veins from getting damaged any more. The heat has almost touched the nerves and caused a lot of damage already. We have to do regular dressing for her every two hours or there is a chance of damaging the skin close to the burnt area. We might need to do a few tests to check if everything is all right.' he added.

'Please do it as soon as possible,' I said.

'We can't do it right now. The only thing that we can do is to wait for the burnt area to dry because there is a tendency that the more it is leathery the more chance it is to become infectious,' he said.

'How much time does it take for the burnt skin to dry?' I asked

'Depends on how severe it is and in this case, it is third degree,' he said.

'She will be fine soon right?' I asked again.

'I hope so,' he said and left. I came to a corner. I took her pic out of my wallet and looked at it holding my breath.

'Everything will be fine soon and you will start smiling again just like every time before,' I told to myself.

'Shall we go?' the nurse asked.

Tarun and I went inside and saw her from a distance. She seemed unconscious.

'How come she is not awake?' I asked the nurse as we came out.

'The doctor has given anaesthesia to make her sleep so that we could continue with the dressing. Look, you guys need to have patience. We see such cases every day.' she said and left.

I left for my room early morning around 5 a.m. as I had to make a few arrangements for her. I took a bath in cold water which felt as if it took all that pain and stress I was going through the whole night. My head was aching badly. I called Tarun to check if everything was fine. Struggling my eyes badly, I couldn't avoid it anymore and fell asleep. The words the doctor said, it kept repeating in my head. She will be fine soon and no matter what, I will take care of her now.

After an hour, I left for her flat to get her clothes and reached the hospital in another half an hour. Tarun left for Raj's home as soon I reached. They

were going to be back in the evening. I checked with the nurse if I can see her when they asked to wait until the doctor comes. They can't allow visitors to enter the ward anytime. Aparna was still asleep. I looked at the walls and then at the crowd outside. None of them meant anything to me. Without her, life was so meaningless.

The doctor came in the afternoon and did some tests before leaving her ward. He didn't speak to me even for a second. I got furious but then I controlled myself thinking he might be busy with other patients.

Raj and Tarun were back in the evening when the doctors allowed us to meet her. Tarun saw those burns on her body and immediately took his eyes off. The nurse immediately covered her body with a blanket when we both sat close to her. She was still feeling drowsy as the effect of anaesthesia was still there. She finally spoke to us when she asked again if we had informed her parents when I told her not to worry.

'Abhi, I am not able to bear it.' she mumbled.

I just held her hands softly without saying a word.

'Is she going to eat anything?' I asked the nurse.

'For a few days, we will be giving her liquid food as the medicines are too strong and she might not be able to digest anything,' she said.

I nodded handing over her clothes. Tarun and Raj asked me to leave. They insisted that they will stay back but I could see their eyes. It felt they hadn't slept properly. I told them to inform me if anything needed immediately. I was going to stay in the hospital during the mornings and at night Tarun was going to stay there from the next day.

It was two weeks and we were just waiting for the doctors to tell something good about her condition but they were still not telling us everything. They would either tell us that *there were some more tests that still need to be conducted or they were busy with some other patients.* The only thing that the nurse confirmed was that the medicines were working. I came back to my room and slept thinking about her.

My phone rang the third time when I woke up. I couldn't find the traffic. I couldn't see that cab driver Ganesh whom I was telling about Aparna. Damn it. Was I dreaming all this while? I checked for that couple. They weren't there. I was sweating all over.

I checked my watch. It was 7 a.m, time to leave for the hospital. I checked the phone. It was ringing again. It was Tarun. I received the phone immediately.

‘Hi, yes tell me.’ I asked.
‘The doctors have taken didi to another ward. She was having some issue in breathing,’ he said.
‘What? Did you talk to anyone and ask what actually happened?’
‘No, they just hurried as the nurse informed the doctor.’
‘Just be there and don’t panic. I am coming.’ I said and kept the phone aside. I felt as though I was still dreaming but I wasn’t. I left in another few minutes and searched for an auto. I found one. I had to buy a few medicines which the doctor had asked me the previous day. I immediately left for the hospital after that but there was huge traffic ahead of me when I asked the auto driver to take another route.
I took my phone and dialled Tarun.
‘Did she return?’ I asked.
‘No, not yet.’
‘But how did this happen?’
‘The nurse said that didi was not able to breathe properly.’
‘Is she fine now?’ I asked.
‘I will inform you once I meet the doctor,’ he said.
‘Ok, I will be there in few minutes. I am stuck in traffic,’ I said when Tarun gave me the shortest route to the hospital. I reached there in another forty minutes when I saw a huge crowd outside her room**.** There were people gathered inside the room and I could listen a few ladies sobbing. I had no idea what had just happened. My heart almost stopped beating as if someone had given me the worst news of my life.
I saw Tarun and Raj coming out from the other door. They smiled at me as our eyes met.
‘She is fine,’ Tarun said.
‘Who are these people in that room?’ I asked.
‘I don’t know. Didi has been shifted to room 412 as doctors wanted to monitor her for some more time.’
‘She is fine right,’ I asked again.
‘Yes, she is better now. I met her.’ he said.
I told them to leave as I was there to look after her. I met the nurse when I asked for the doctor. She said, I would be able to meet him in the evening. After thirty minutes, I was allowed to meet Aparna. She smiled as she looked at me. I made her have some liquid food that the nurse had given me after which she asked me to wait outside. I insisted if I can stay there for a

little longer but she refused. I might get an infection, she said. I met the doctor in the evening when he informed me that everything was fine and they had done some more tests to check the breathing issue which were all negative.

Three weeks later, the burns on her hands and legs had started drying finally. She was showing some improvement. The doctors had reduced her medication and informed that things were coming in place. She had finally started speaking to me and the pain had gone down to some extent but it was there still to a considerable level. She complained about some pain in her legs which was due to lack of movement but the doctors said it will be there. He even informed me that she was going to be discharged in a few days.

I called my mom and informed her everything when she scolded me for not telling her when it all happened. She asked if Aparna was fine and immediately asked me to book two tickets for her and dad. I checked but there were no tickets available until the next two weeks. I finally booked them.

I gave the news to Tarun and Raj as well.

Due to a few complications in her health and recovery, the doctors had suggested to let her stay in the hospital for a few more days. After three more weeks, doctors did their routine tests and finally gave me the best news of my life. I could take her home. I was happy, really happy. I could take care of her on my own now. After a long time, I saw Aparna smiling as I gave her the news.

But still, she needed someone with her all the time when Tarun decided to shift to her flat for some time. I changed my room close to where she was staying. She was still not able to walk on her own due to the pain in her joints. Even the burns on the skin were yet to recover which was causing furthermore pain when she was trying to walk. We had got support for her as she insisted that she would like to walk on her own. I was working from her home sometimes as she needed a person always by her side.

My parents came to Bangalore to meet her. Dad stayed for a week after which he had to leave but Mom stayed back to stay with Aparna. It took one more month for her to finally recover after which Mom left.

Chapter 19

A week later, I had to fly to Hyderabad. Rajan had been chasing me for weeks already. The client was not ready to wait anymore. I agreed to move to Hyderabad for not more than a month. Rajan said, he needed me there for a couple of months. I showed him the mail where he had committed that he would need me for a month only. I reminded him of companies' policies. After that, he looped in Bala with great hope. Bala told him he has kids to take care of. He can't fly. Rajan told Bala that he has no other option and he needs to be there, once I am back. Bala looked at me, probably cursing me for everything. He finally agreed.

I reached Hyderabad along with Rajan. I found out two things about him on the flight. One, he can sleep with his eyes open and two, he mutters official stuff while he is asleep. The mornings started way too early. We had to be in the office around 7 a.m. and the rest of the day was packed with meetings and sessions which further continued until late nights. The only way of communication with Aparna was her messages, which she would drop me whenever she was free. I would reply to her even during the meetings. She told me not to worry too much. She would take care of herself. I scolded her and asked her to do as I say or else I will marry Nivedita whose marriage was cancelled at the last moment. Nivedita sounded depressed when she informed me. Aparna sounded more depressed when she got the news. I told Nivedita, I would find a suitable guy for her. She cried even more after that, asking if I am still getting married to Aparna. After listening to my response, she cried even more. I told her I don't want any more drama in my life and disconnected the call.

Aparna was not listening to me. She was irregular in responding to my calls. Before going to bed at night, I made sure that I give her a call for a few minutes. On the call, I gave her all the updates of the entire day and how badly I missed her when I saw any couple in the cafeteria or even outside. She would laugh and tease me, even more, saying *'It's ok. Just a few more days and we will be together'* on which I had nothing else to say other than smiling at my bad fate. I was really missing her a lot, waiting for the month to end so that I would reach Bangalore and see her again.

The last week was hectic. Aparna had stopped responding to my calls at night. When I asked her if everything was alright, she said she gets too tired due to the work pressure. She needs to sleep early. The month ended. I was going to meet her in a few more hours.

The first thing I did before leaving was to call her but she was not picking up the phone. She had never done this before. At least she used to drop me a message if she was busy. But she didn't. I called Tarun but he told, he was on a trip to Bandipur with his friends. I asked him if he had spoken to her. He said he only spoke to her before leaving for the trip a day before. Due to the network issue, we could not speak to each other. He did message me a little later that he will call me in some time.

I was getting weird thoughts in my mind. My office shuttle dropped me to the airport on time and I boarded the flight at 4:30 p.m, still trying to reach out to her sitting on my window seat. Her phone was ringing but no one was picking.

'Come on Aparna pick up the phone. At least drop me a message that you will call me back once you are free.' I was talking to myself. I took a deep breath and looked outside the window thinking everything is just fine and she might have kept her phone in silent mode. But on the other hand, I was also thinking why would she keep her phone on silent. That too when she knew I was flying back to Bangalore. I took another deep breath and looked towards the crew just to distract my mind. I wanted to talk to someone. I still had an hour to go when I saw my phone ringing. It was from Rajan.

'*No, I don't want to talk to anyone right now,*' I told to myself.

I was scared if he asks me to cancel my return trip. He had done that last week with one of my colleagues where he had to leave the flight at the last moment. I kept my phone to silent and pulled her photo from my wallet. I recalled that last conversation we had where she kept telling me that she was missing me a lot and I told her that I was getting something for her but I didn't tell her what it was. I also told her that we would go on a trip as I had a long holiday approved already. I saw a message flashing on my phone the next second.

'Abhi, you have left something in the hotel room. The housekeeping informed me,' it read. It was from Rajan.

I forgot taking the gift which I had bought for Aparna, a pair of bangles exactly the way she often wore. Last night, I came out with my colleague where he bought a diamond pendant for his fiancée and I bought bangles. Everything was looking so sorted until this morning. The flight took off but I still didn't receive any message from her. I switched off my phone. The flight attendant had already warned me twice. She didn't look happy with this one passenger who was making her repeat the same word again and

again '*Can you please switch off the phone'*.
Is Aparna in a flight too for her official work? Maybe, maybe not . But, she didn't tell me if she was flying.
'Why didn't she call me when she knew I was boarding a flight today? She knows that I want to talk to her before starting any journey.' I was talking to myself. I didn't even realize when I dozed off looking at my phone. I woke up when I heard an announcement that we were landing. I immediately looked for my phone. It was lying close to my feet. I might have dropped it while sleeping. I picked it up immediately.
'Can I switch on the phone?' I asked the same flight attendant who told me to switch it off.
'A few more minutes,' she said showing her jet white teeth.
'Look it's urgent. I want to talk to someone.' I said.
She made a weird face but gave me a nod this time. I switched it on expecting a lot of messages and kisses from her. A sorry too, for not replying to my calls. There was not a single message from her. I was worried. It was eight hours already since I had been trying to reach out to her. Something was wrong. I called her once again. It was coming switched off now. My hands shivered as my brain stopped thinking.
'Not again,' I told to myself. I was scared.
'Why this trip turned out to be a nightmare for me?'
I was just rolling the phone in my hand, sweating like hell. The flight landed. I grabbed my luggage from the overhead locker and hurried my way out. I bumped into a lot of passengers who glared at me as if something was wrong with me. They had no idea that they were right. I picked up my other bag from the luggage counter and ran my way out, towards the exit. I had to book a cab immediately and reach her flat.
My phone buzzed as I came out of the exit looking for a cab. It was still in silent mode. There was a message.
'Angry with me?' It read. It was from Aparna. I cursed her.
'Yes Of course,' I told myself. I continued reading. It was a long message.
'I missed you so much Abhi, you know that. I know you have been trying to talk to me since morning but there was something I wanted you to know. Rather, I wanted you to see it for yourself. Yes, I was ignoring all your calls and messages but I am really really sorry. I know, you are angry with me right now. But you know what, you will love me more after what you are going to see.' the message ended and a smile came on my face.

A second later another message popped in *'Ok now stop reading my messages and turn to your left'*. Still looking at the message, I turned to my left. Aparna's parents were standing at the arrivals. They looked at me with a smile on their face. For a moment I was blank, wondering what was happening. I picked my luggage and walked towards them. Her parents hugged me as I bowed down to touch their feet. I had no idea what was going on. I couldn't have been much happier. I was waiting for this day where I could convince them to marry their daughter. I saw Aparna standing close to a pillar looking at me with a mild smile on her face. She gave me a flying kiss as our eyes met. Thank god, uncle didn't see. There was more probability of our marriage getting cancelled one more time.

Aparna wore a pink salwar kameez and a bindi on her forehead. I couldn't take my eyes off her face for a few seconds. She wore exactly the same bangles as I had bought for her as a gift. I had no idea how did this happen. *Did Rajan send it to her?*

'When did you both come here?' I asked her parents.

'We came three days back,' Uncle said.

'And Aparna didn't even inform me,' I told to myself.

'Tarun told us everything about the incident.' aunty said and hugged me. She pulled my cheeks just like Mom often did. I walked towards the girl who meant the world to me. I was about to hug her when she made her eyes bigger. I realized that just a few feet behind us, her father was standing. I shook hands with her like an idiot.

'Missed me?' she asked.

'No,' I said. She smiled.

'Where did you get these bangles from?' I asked.

'Mom got it for me.'

'Guess what?' I said.

'What?'

'I bought the same bangles for you.'

'I don't trust you,' she said, her smile grew bigger this time.

'Me too.' I said.

I felt like kissing her.

'Where are the bangles?' she asked.

'I left it at the hotel.'

'Seriously! Who does that?' she said.

'I am sorry but why didn't you tell me about all this? Do you even know

how tensed I was?'
'Liked my surprise?'
'Loved it,' I said pulling her cheeks. I couldn't stop myself.
'Abhi stop it. Dad is here.' she said.
'So what? You called him, I didn't.'
'Behave yourself.' she said making her eyes bigger.
'He is soon going to be my father in law.' I said.
She smiled when I saw Tarun, Raj, Bhoobala and one more guy coming from a distance.
'They were on a trip to Bandipur right?' I asked Aparna.
She smiled when I understood the whole story.
'When did you come from Bandipur?' I asked Tarun. He too was involved in the plan. He hugged me tightly.
'Welcome back Jiju,' he said smiling.
'Jiju?' I asked. It sounded different. Of course, I was shocked. I was hearing that word for the first time from his mouth.
'Yes Jiju.' they all said together and laughed looking at me who was still in shock.
'Tarun, take the luggage and keep it in the car,' uncle said.
Raj had got his car and there was another car which was for Aparna's parents. We sat inside Innova. I grabbed the back seat immediately with Aparna to my right. The rest of the guys were sitting in the front seats.
'Jiju, he is Sangeet and Sangeet he is,' Tarun said when Sangeet interrupted.
'He is Jiju,' Sangeet said. We all laughed.
'Hi, this is Abhishek,' I said looking at Sangeet. Tarun and Sangeet were sitting on the middle seat. Raj and Bhoobala sat on the front seat.
'Guys any girlfriends?' I asked. Everyone looked at Sangeet and that poor guy looked at me. I was happy that their group at least had one guy who was like me.
'Learn something from him,' I said patting him.
'They are all scared talking to girls,' Sangeet said.
'No, we are not,' Tarun said staring at Sangeet.
'Girls are scared to talk to us.' Raj added.
We all laughed one more time.
'Mechies rocks,' they all said in sync taking a toast with their empty hands.
Aparna was just smiling not saying a word.
'Someone is waiting for you,' she said.

‘Who, Nivedita?’ I asked playfully.
‘Shut up Abhi,’ she said. I laughed. She still hated her.
‘But she is a nice girl,’ I said.
‘Then marry her,’
‘Wait, let me call her,’ I said pulling my phone from the pocket.
‘Abhi, I am joking,’ she said taking my phone from my hand.
‘Then who is waiting?’ I asked again.
‘Have patience. You will get to know,’ she said, messaging to someone.
‘Who is it?’ I asked.
‘Personal,’ she said.
‘Oh really.’ I said.
‘Yes,’ she said.
‘And how come your parents are here?’ I asked.
‘I told them everything about the accident,’ she said.
Tarun looked at her, making his eyes bigger.
‘Tell him the truth,’ he said looking at his sister.
‘Ok, he told everything to them,’ she said. I smiled seeing her taking all the credit of her brother.
‘And then what did they say?’ I asked.
‘They were happy but they were still upset that they were not informed?’
‘Then?’ I asked
‘Then, I handled everything. Don’t worry.’ she said.
Tarun looked at her again.
‘Ok fine, he handled everything,’ she said irritatingly.
‘Thanks,’ Tarun said.
‘This girl won’t give credit to me for anything,’ he added.
‘Same here,’ I said. The rest laughed this time.
‘Don’t tell me this was your plan? Because I loved it.’ I said looking at her.
‘Of course, it was my plan.’ she said.
Tarun looked at her again.
‘You look in the front and don’t you dare look back,’ she said.
We all laughed. The poor girl couldn’t take credit for anything. I was so happy to be amongst a group of people who cared about me. They made my world look so beautiful. The girl on my right was everything I ever wanted and the guys in the front made me feel so special.
‘I wish Manish was here,’ I said.
‘Yes, I wish too,’ Aparna said.

Tarun looked at Raj when he looked at Bhoobala. Sangeet looked at me. Maybe he wanted to say something when Tarun nudged him badly. I knew something was going on but no one was telling me a thing. The car stopped at an ice-cream corner. We all got down and placed our orders. Aparna asked me to grab a seat at the only table present. We were six of us. The boys were busy talking at the counter. Aparna came and sat opposite to me. Everyone else was talking through their eyes. I wondered, why Raj stopped the car without even anyone asking him to do so.
'Am I supposed to know anything?' I asked.
'What?' she said as if she had no idea what I was talking about.
'Look I know you are hiding something,' I said.
'No Abhi. We just wanted to have some ice cream.' she said.
'And did you guys plan for this as well because I didn't see anyone asking Raj to stop the car.'
'I asked him before you arrived that we will stop here,' she said.
'A vanilla for me.' I heard a voice from the counter.
It was louder than needed. I ignored.
'I am here for my friend's engagement.' the same voice said.
His voice sounded familiar this time. I turned towards him. He was busy on a call. The very next second he turned towards me giving me another shock of the day. It was Manish. He stood there with a big smile on his face. I could not even imagine that he was right in front of my eyes after so many years. I hugged him as he came closer. He gave me a tight hug which almost took all the pain I had due to the flight.

I looked at Aparna, who had given me the best surprise once again. She just blinked her eyes without saying a word. She knew how much I was missing him.
'Don't you want to meet Nidhi?' he asked.
'What, even she is here?' I asked.
Manish nodded.
'But where is she?'
'Right behind you,' he said
I turned around to see her standing close to me and smiling.
'You still hate me?' I asked her.
'Not anymore,' she said.

We all laughed. We sat there for a few minutes and spoke about those crazy moments we had spent together. We recalled every single thing we

could think of but I was still in shock thinking how Manish was able to pull it so far with Nidhi. Just kidding but I was shocked a little.

They told me about their marriage which was happening next year when I asked him to plan a bachelor's trip before the marriage. Rohit and Rahul were to be invited too. A little later, we got a call from Aparna's dad when we had to leave. We were going to her uncle's flat who had returned from the US and had invited me to meet him.

Manish and I sat in the front seat whereas the ladies sat in the back seat. Manish had booked a separate car. I had no idea that the day which looked so chaotic a few hours ago will turn out to be the best day of my life. All credits to the girl, I love the most. Finally, her parents had accepted me. The mere thought of now spending the rest of my life with her was making me crazy.

It took us another forty minutes to finally reach uncle's house. I saw three ladies standing with a thaali. One of them was Aparna's mom and the other two were probably her aunts.

'Who are they?' I asked, as soon as I came out of the car.

'The left one is Shraddha aunty and the right one is Anjani Mausi,' she said.

'And the old couple there is Nana jee and Nanee jee.' she added.

'Don't try to act smart.' I said. She smiled.

I faked a smile as I came closer touching their feet one by one. I don't know why I was feeling embarrassed standing in front of them. I felt like a groom already. Maybe because I was not expecting any of these after such a hectic journey, I had a few hours ago and even more because my girl had left me alone with all of them. She was busy talking to Nidhi.

I glared at her as she looked at me. I would have loved all of this even more if Aparna was standing beside me. After the welcome aartie, I came inside when I saw Aparna's dad and uncle dressed in ethnic clothes greeting me inside. Aparna's dad came closer to me and hugged me tightly. Within no second, he lifted me in his arms. Everyone laughed and screamed as he did that. It was a ritual that they perform when the guy comes to a girl's house for the first time but it was getting really embarrassing. Aparna was standing at a distance and smiling. Raj and Sangeet were busy taking my photos, which I knew would be the worst pics ever taken. I was not even dressed properly.

'You both can go and get fresh.' Aparna's uncle said looking at me and Manish.

‘Your room is on the second floor,’ Aparna said.
‘And Manish?’ I asked.
‘Listen, I don’t want a separate room for him. I want to stay with him.’ I said as we walked up the stairs. I just wanted to spend some time with him. I looked behind. Manish and Nidhi were busy discussing their honeymoon plans I guess, as they climbed the stairs behind us.
‘Everything has been planned the way you always wanted,’ Aparna said.
‘I love you,’ I said as she opened the door to my room.
‘I love you too.’ My mom said.
Yes, out of nowhere my mom and dad were right there and they heard what I just said.
‘Shit,’ I said in my head and bowed down to touch their feet. Manish pushed me aside and bowed down too for their blessings. Mom kissed Manish on the forehead and the first thing she said was ‘*Why don’t you eat anything?’*
I looked at Manish’s belly which was telling a different story but as we all know how moms are, I kept quiet. Mom came close to me and hugged me. And then she said in her unusual mumbled tone *‘I am so lucky to have her as my daughter in law’*.

Dad looked at me feeling left out I guess. I hugged him too. He brushed my neatly combed hairs. I combed it right away when everyone laughed looking at me.
‘Come on I have to look good,’ I said. Everyone laughed again.
Mom and dad were asked to go downstairs.

I actually wanted to talk to them for some time but they left immediately. I could hear some aartie starting soon on the ground floor. I had no idea what was that for. We had some food after some time and proceeded with our fun activities until 9 p.m. at night when Shraddha aunty came running and gave us the best news of our life. She told that the pandit was trying to match our Kundli and had finally arrived at a date, our marriage date. It was 30th Sep. Aparna looked at me and smiled.

It was 11 p.m, when our families joined us to play antakshari. The boring part being, the elders made their own group and we had to make our own group. They were torturing us with those old movie songs which we hadn’t even heard of. A little later they moved to their respective rooms but we stayed back. No one was feeling sleepy. Sangeet, Tarun, Raj, Bhoobala formed one group. Manish, Nidhi, Aparna and I formed another. We started

the game of dumb charades. Of course, we were the stronger side as we had two ladies on our end. We answered every time correctly whereas the opposite team was failing badly. Raj and Bhoobala turned out to be the weak links, the issue being they both were from South and every movie we asked them to act on were from the North, which they hadn't ever seen. We finally won teasing the losing team.

The next morning was a mix of emotion and happiness. Our parents were leaving on the same train. We insisted that they should leave by flight as it was a three-day journey by train whereas it was just three hours by flight. Aparna's dad told that he will get some more time to spend with my parents which they couldn't have here. I felt happy. Aparna was happy too. And then there were these guys who looked more than happy to see everything in our life falling in place.

Chapter 20

30thSep

The day of our marriage arrived. Two days ago, it was declared that it was going to be a state bund on 30th Sep. But the pandits told us that if we miss this day we had to wait for seven more months to find a date. Our parents didn't agree. The marriage procession continued on the same day.

We didn't have many people to join. There were members of my family and a few relatives who finally agreed to come to Bangalore. From Aparna's family, everyone joined along with her Nana and Naani jee.

Her colleagues from Chennai came the day before. I greeted all of them myself. The only thing, they were saying was that this was the first love marriage they were attending. There was a shortage of rooms as few of her colleagues decided to join at the last moment when we could not do much and ended up accommodating three of them in one room. We thought they would curse us but listening to the noise and fun they were having in those rooms, we didn't repent much. They were having their best times together.

Vivek and Nishikant, Tarun's friends reached our hotel three days before. They were well built. I could say they were the only people in our entire group who had a personality to look for. Sangeet, Raj, and Bhoobala were coming late as they had to arrange for the catering who had refused to come to our reception venue due to the strike.

Arya Samaj mandir was at a distance of a few km from the hotel. Tarun

had arranged for the cab a week before but due to the strike, there were no cab movements happening. The marriage that was supposed to start at 11 a.m. was further delayed by three hours. The cab drivers started dropping guests from the hotel to the temple. Even though the pandits made some noise regarding the muhuratam getting delayed, Aparna's nana jee intervened and they agreed to proceed with the puja. The rest of the arrangements for the marriage ceremony was taken care by our respective parents.

Aparna was still running late for an hour. She still hadn't arrived at the venue. I guess I don't need to tell what the reason was. The make-up of course. And this time it was her own marriage. So, no doubt she was not going to leave any chance of looking the most beautiful amongst all the guests present in the marriage hall. Every time I called, she said that the makeup lady had not yet arrived. I did tell her that I don't mind if she is looking a little less beautiful. She told *Abhi I have to live with my marriage pics all my life. I can't take any chance*. I couldn't say a word after that.

My dad was asking me to call her. He had no idea what was going on. The marriage was about to start in another half an hour and she still hadn't arrived arrive when Tarun came and informed that she had left already. I took a sigh of relief.

'Shall I go and stand at the entrance to greet her or shall I sit near the Pandit.' I asked myself.

My phone buzzed. It was her.

'Are you done?' I asked.

'Finally. You know these makeup guys right.' she said.

'Yes, and I guess I know you more than them.'

' Ok listen, give your parents the same excuse what I just said, if in case they ask.'

'I have already told.'

'Great then. Ok, I am coming in a few minutes.'

'I am waiting.'

She finally reached the venue. I was not at all angry to wait for this long. She looked beautiful as always as she came out of the cab when our eyes finally met. She smiled and gave me that ' *How Do I look*' expression. Everyone was looking at me. I took out my phone and typed a message to her, reading which she smiled with those dimples on her left cheek.

'*Why I feel, that I don't deserve a girl this beautiful'* was the message.

Every second I sat with her, taking all those vows of marriage felt like the beginning of a new life with *the girl who stood by me* in every step of my life since I had known her. I hadn't moved for an hour sitting at the same place with her to my right. She kept making her eyes bigger, whenever I was murmuring anything in her ears. I was just telling her '*how long I will have to wait to get a kiss from her.'*

It was too long since she had given me a flying kiss. But this time I wanted more, I mean a real kiss from her on my cheek. The mantras grew louder as the marriage procession proceeded and we were asked to take those '*Seven Circles'* around the fire.

After the ceremony, everyone took some time to relax. I, Aparna, Nidhi, and Manish sat in a corner discussing their marriage plan when they brought the topic of honeymoon. I don't know what aggravated me and I felt like kissing Aparna. Maybe it was because she had never looked this pretty before or maybe because she was officially mine now. I had no idea what was going on in my mind. Manish was sitting to my left and to his left was sitting Aparna. To her further left sat Nidhi. Manish was busy watching Nidhi more than usual in her traditional attire when the best thing happened. There was a power cut suddenly and the only thing I could see was nothing. And there wasn't a better chance for me to kiss Aparna other than this. But I don't know, why I was so scared as if I was still not married. And moreover, I had to make sure that the kiss lands in the right place. A minor mistake could have messed up everything if you know what I mean. Without wasting a second, I got up from my chair and after doing every possible permutation combination, I finally kissed her. Yes, I kissed her and she didn't even say anything. I can't explain how I felt. I felt happy, actually somewhere in the sky amongst those stars. Of course, I was smiling after I did what I did.

'Nidhi and Manish would be really shocked if they find out,' I thought.

But things changed as the power was back. There was an issue. I had no idea how Nidhi was sitting in Aparna's place and Aparna was sitting in Nidhi's place. Now, I had no idea whom did I end up kissing because Aparna was barely having any expression on her face whereas Nidhi was glaring at Manish. I saw her saying something to Aparna in her ears. Aparna looked at me as if I had done something she never expected me to. I had no clue what had just happened.

'Learn Abhi,' Aparna said looking at me with disgust.

‘I didn’t get you,’ I said my heart already in my mouth.
‘To be romantic,’ she said
‘What do you mean?’ I asked.
I knew something wrong had happened.
‘Manish just kissed Nidhi. Look how much he loves her. You can’t even dare to do so.’ she said.
I was thinking right. I had kissed Nidhi instead of Aparna.
‘Damn it, I kissed her. Manish is going to kill me if he finds out.’ I told to myself. Manish almost fell from his chair as he heard what Aparna said. Nidhi was still not able to take her eyes off him. Maybe she was angry at him. Only I knew what had actually happened and the rest had no idea. Manish looked at me.
‘But I haven’t kissed her,’ Manish said when I patted my hand on the forehead. Nidhi looked at Manish and said *‘don’t try to act smart’* when Manish repeated his words again.
They all looked at me. I looked up and then I looked down avoiding eye contact from all of them. To be truthful, I just wanted to run away from there when they all took my name in sync *‘Abhi, Was that you?’*. I slowly lifted my head and looked at them.

I had no option but to explain to them the whole thing from the beginning. They were all silent for good ten seconds when they suddenly burst into laughter thinking about my dumb plan. We all laughed our hearts and lungs out.

I still say sorry to Manish for that incident every time we meet and he laughs out loud saying *‘Don’t repeat it again’*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I can’t possibly thank everyone who has contributed to this book. Every person, every experience I had, is the reason this book is in your hands right now. But still, I would give it a try and thank the few people I don’t want to miss being grateful for:

Aparna and Abhishek had been with me throughout the process of writing.

Abhishek was the first who motivated me to write a novel when I doubted myself. He made my passion into a dream come true. He contributed by ingesting ideas which gave me the road map to the book. Without his constant support, late-night calls and inspiring words, writing wouldn’t have been this easy.

Aparna, for bearing with me every time I needed her help. She sat down with me for long hours to review the book. Her consistent guidance made me hold on to each character and bring them out in the best possible way.

My parents Ashok Kumar Gupta and Pushpa Lata Gupta who had been a source of inspiration and guidance for me throughout my life.

My elder brother Praveen Kumar, who had been behind me day and night to make the book happen, for pushing me all the time that I can do it and for all those creative doodles which he made for the book cover. From one of them, I got the idea of this cover.

Raj Kiran, for brainstorming the scenes in the chapters. He would not hesitate to drop by my room at odd hours and helping me for writing a particular scene in a certain way. He made sure that criticising me was at its peak to bring out the best in me. You have to sit with me for the next one too Raj.

Ankit Jha, for giving insights on how to make the publishing happen. He would push me for everything, not letting anything go unnoticed. He was a pain, a sweet pain to bear. I didn’t know he would turn out to be a great friend in such a small span of time. But now that we are, I expect his help for all my future projects.

Pavan Kumar Rambatala, for his valuable review.

My bestie, Sangeet Kumar who has been with me all the time. Life has never been this motivating with him before. He had been a love guru all his life which did help me to bring out the characters better than I could have.

I would also like to thanks Deepak Ujala, Bhoobala Chandar who had also been there, nagging at me to make them sit and go through my manuscript.

My peers Vivek Kapoor, Meghna Pradhan, Achal Puranik, Biswajit Patra who had been my best critics throughout the process.

My publishing team at Goya Publishing for their constant support every time I needed it.